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A Feast of Lamentations: The Translation of Catherine Mavrikakis's *Deuils cannibales et mélancoliques*

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ABSTRACT

Catherine Mavrikakis's *Deuils cannibales et mélancoliques*, published in Spring of 2000, is a fascinating first novel by this professor of French literature. The 'story', which comprises a series of anecdotes, hovers between fiction and autobiography, though the reader is never sure where one ends and the other begins. Mavrikakis's subject matter – death and mourning – is an extension of her previous academic work, particularly her study of the renowned French author, Hervé Guibert, who wrote a trilogy of novels based on his personal battle with AIDS. Critics responded favourably to Mavrikakis's new work, praising the superior quality of the author's writing, the sardonic humour she maintains in the face of all the dying, and her interesting use of cultural allusions that demand of both reader and translator a familiarity with intellectual and popular icons.

The preface of this thesis places Mavrikakis's new work within the context of new and established literary genres: thanatological writing, elegy and plague fiction, and AIDS-infected literature, and specifically, Hervé Guibert's novels, which Mavrikakis imitates in a curiously anthropophagic way. The final section of the preface examines the difficulties and challenges met during the translation process, such as a shifting level of language and a mercurial narratorial voice. The bulk of the thesis is the English translation of the first half of this remarkable book, newly titled *A Feast of Lamentations*. Also included are two excerpts from the second half of the novel, which have special significance to the thrust of Mavrikakis's fiction.

"All pain is shattering; but when it's shared it is no longer
a banishment. It is not out of morose delectation, nor out of exhibitionism,
nor out of provocation that writers often tell of hideous or deeply saddening experiences:
through the medium of words they render these experiences universal. . .
In my opinion one of the essential functions of literature, a function
which means that nothing else can take its place,
is the overcoming of that isolation
which is common to us all and which nevertheless
makes us strangers to each other.

– Simone de Beauvoir[1]

To my family, for supporting my return to academia,
To all those who listened, and
To Sherry Simon, for setting the table for
A Feast of Lamentations.

[1] As cited in Reider and Ruppelt, 9

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Introduction

One might well ask why Catherine Mavrikakis's *Deuils cannibales et mélancoliques* merits translation into English.[2] This, the author's first novel, bears a title grim enough to put off even the most intrepid reader. Mavrikakis has not waded gently into the world of fiction; she has plunged in and cut neatly through the murky waters of one of the most difficult yet universal themes of all time: Death. Because most of us "in the modern Western world still view death as an ineffable and sublime catastrophe. . . we remain. . . ill-equipped to look death in the eye when it arrives" (Wright, 50). Here, Catherine Mavrikakis stares straight at it, refusing to blink until she can "establish some distance between the dead and the living without completely severing the connections" (Smith, 326). The author herself says in an interview that her intent was to bury her dead, "*mais les enterrer de façon à ce qu'ils demeurent accessibles*" (Monpetit, D1).

Before the appearance of this book, Mavrikakis – an American-born professor of literature in the *Département d'études françaises* at Montréal's Concordia University – wrote and published articles which deal with the subject of "death literature" on an intellectual basis. In these nonfiction essays for academic and literary journals, Mavrikakis acknowledges the reality that over the past ten to fifteen years, more and more writers have been writing about suffering, dying, and death as they themselves are suffering and dying, particularly as a result of AIDS.

In "To End the Glorification of Suffering", Mavrikakis "laughingly" describes the

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[2] In this preface, all English translations of citations from *Deuils cannibales et mélancoliques* are mine.

suffering she endures after promising to do just that, to end the glorification of suffering, by writing an article with that very title: "I am quite proud of. . . my suffering, as if suffering, grieving, and disease give one better access to the truth" (Mavrikakis 1998, 124). She goes on to analyze the effect that knowing one is a victim of AIDS and will soon die has on one's writing as well as the effect that this knowledge has on the reception of material written under these circumstances. She also asks what relief from or control over disease and suffering the act of writing about them imparts. As Mavrikakis and others have observed, any effort to deal with death – including writing about it – is an "attempt to both represent death and to contain it, to make it comprehensible and thereby defuse some of its power" (Bronfen and Goodwin, 4).

In the article mentioned above, Mavrikakis devotes a great deal of attention to the French writer, Hervé Guibert, who chronicled his battle with AIDS in three autobiographical novels before his death in 1991. In fact, her article entitled "*Le sida, puisqu'il faut l'appeler par son nom. . .*", focuses entirely on the analysis of the "*interrogations que posent les écrits d'Hervé Guibert sur ce qu'il est convenu d'appeler «son» sida*" (Mavrikakis 1993, 146). As a result of her investigation of the literature produced by writers dying of AIDS, Mavrikakis concludes that "AIDS asks to be spoken, confessed, to be brought out of its silence, and especially to be elevated to the level of narrative" (Mavrikakis 1998, 130).

Mavrikakis did not leave this task for others; she took her own advice and the result, *Deuils cannibales et mélancoliques*, was published in 2000. We expect individuals to "[turn] to the imagination to deal with the seemingly mysterious forces of nature, and AIDS has been no exception" (Pastore, 2). The voices of people dying of AIDS are not, however, the only

ones we hear emerging from the novel. Death takes many shapes, and we learn of a young woman who is killed in a car accident, a psychiatrist who commits suicide, and a man named Hervé who dies in a bombing incident. Death has become a constant companion in the life of Mavrikakis's narrator, and thus she feels that "there are times when you have to speak of death. One such time is when a person you love has died. If the bereaved are to survive, they must deal with their grief" (Woods, 155). Too many dead and dying and too many lost friends to mourn: here perhaps is the emotional component of the subject matter that drove Catherine Mavrikakis to move past the literary analysis of AIDS-related literature and into the realm of her *own* imagination.

The Fiction of Catherine Mavrikakis

In *Deuils cannibales et mélancoliques* (*Deuils*), Catherine Mavrikakis explores her narrator's personal experiences with – and her profound emotional reactions to – death and loss. Not only does this narrator bear Mavrikakis's first name, but she also shares the author's profession as professor of French literature, her affiliation with Concordia University in Montréal, and even her e-mail address. Naturally readers are quick to ask where the line between reality and imagination is drawn and how much of *Deuils* is autobiography marginally disguised as fiction.

No conventional plot unfolds; there is no beginning, no climax, no denouement. Instead, Mavrikakis starts at the end, with a death. An interior monologue, in which the narrator describes a series of deaths that she must mourn, ensues. The reader sees these losses through Catherine's eyes as she struggles to find a way to live in their aftermath. But the narrative voice is mercurial: one moment it is rational, concerned with numbers, statistics, and actuarial data; the next it's raging against Death and the arbitrary toll it takes. At times, Catherine is overwhelmed with sorrow; at others, she is overcome by the irony and the absurdity of life and death. If she cannot learn "*comment vivre la mort des autres*", she will go mad with grief and suffering; she will be consumed by her own *deuils cannibales et mélancoliques* (Malavoy-Racine, 31).

Although it seems unusual for someone so young to have such a fixation on death, people do seem to be 'dropping like flies' around her. Some of the dead are dear to her; some are only acquaintances; some are total strangers. Even more curious is the fact that Mavrikakis names all the defunct 'Hervé', in all likelihood as an homage to Hervé Guibert.

There are so many dead Hervés to remember that they begin to lose their individuality, blending together in the narrator's thoughts: Hervé the *metteur en scène*, Hervé the attentive hairdresser, Hervé the pedophilic psychiatrist. . .

Deuils appeared on the Québec literary scene in the Spring of 2000, and it quickly garnered the positive attention of local critics in spite of the fact that it is "*la Mort qui occupe l'avant-scène dans ce récit solomnel, lugubre et beau comme La Passion de Saint Matthieu. Ici, la Mort adopte mille visages et autant de noms, en affichant. . .une nette prédilection pour ce grand mal au petit nom : sida.*" (Péan, B2). While many other contemporary writers have also witnessed or personally suffered the cruel swath AIDS has cut through their communities in recent years, it is partly due to Mavrikakis's writing style that her thoughts on the capricious cruelties of life and death do not become merely "*[des] ruminations sordides*" (Péan, B2).

Stanley Péan, critic for Montréal's *La Presse*, notes that what saves *Deuils* from being just another collection of morbid ponderings is the author's "*style flamboyant. . . le caractère quasi incantatoire de son écriture*" (Péan, B2). Further approbation for the author's writing skills is found in other reviews of the novel. In *Le Droit*, Marie-Paule Villeneuve states that Mavrikakis's writing "*laisse peu de place à la broderie et aux mots inutiles*" and that the style is "*simple. . . mais différent et intéressant*" (Villeneuve, A14). The critic for *Voir* praises Mavrikakis for letting her fierce emotions explode "*dans des mots précis comme un coup de scalpel. . . . [le livre est] une introspection sensible et juste, dans l'écrin d'une construction littéraire maîtrisée*" (Malavoy-Racine, 31).

The superior quality of Mavrikakis's writing helps her to avoid the trap that too often

snares "the author who wishes to write about AIDS. . . . The personal narrative threatens to reduce any story about someone with AIDS to the same story of decay and death" (Kruger, 81). Kathrine Varnes concurs, commenting that the reaction of a lesser writer to the "pop-psychologese of experts" who offer up simplistic solutions to grief is similar to that of "the twentieth-century mourner [who] is hard-pressed to retain any kind of linguistic dignity in the face of loss. . . . loss [that] has become trite rather than timeless" (Varnes, 317).

However, style does not make up for content, and the critics seem to agree that Mavrikakis's novel is not lacking in this respect either. In fact, Villeneuve concludes that the success of the novel is due more to its content than its style and that in spite of "*la présence omniprésente de la mort, il n'y a rien de funèbre ou de pathétique dans Deuils cannibales et mélancoliques*" (Villeneuve, A14). Fortunately, Mavrikakis's narrator does not drone on and on, wallowing in her own misery of mourning. Villeneuve attributes this in part to the author's frequent interjection of cultural allusions and the inclusion of details from the narrator's daily life, which are almost certainly drawn from Mavrikakis's own. The novel is "*truffé de références*", from intellectuals to popular icons like Princess Diana and Mother Theresa (Pagé).

Villeneuve also points out the importance of irony and dark humour in Mavrikakis's death watch: "*aussi curieux que cela puisse paraître, [le livre] est drôle dans une certaine mesure. En raison de toutes ces situations qui baignent souvent dans l'absurde*" (Villeneuve, A14). There is no denying that the author unflinchingly examines a frightening and morbid subject, but Mavrikakis "*arrive à nous faire rire malgré tout*" (Pagé).

Judging by its own virtues and by the critical opinion of some of its first readers, this

surprising first novel by Catherine Mavrikakis "*[est] à lire absolument*"[3] and should be translated so that readers of English can also enjoy it. The author of *Deuils cannibales et mélancoliques* lets us in on a secret, telling us in her own inimitable voice (loosely disguised as her narrator's), how she is too often called upon to bury both friends, acquaintances, and strangers and then to mourn their deaths. Amazing as it seems, she accomplishes this without totally losing her sense of humour or giving in to powerful suicidal urges of her own.

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[3] (www.freeflights.net/tempsperdu/suggestions_de_lecture.htm)

Thanatological Writing

The term "thanatological writing" refers to literature concerning the interdisciplinary study of death, dying, illness, and bereavement (Boulé 1999, 207). Although Jean-Pierre Boulé uses the term to describe the fiction of Hervé Guibert, it certainly applies to Catherine Mavrikakis's *Deuils cannibales et mélancoliques* as well. Not only does Mavrikakis's novel fall into this wide-ranging category of literature, but it also shares the characteristics of several more-circumscribed genres. The novel has features in common with two established written forms that deal with thanatological issues: elegy and plague literature. More specifically, *Deuils* falls under the heading of a new genre of fiction that deals with death in the AIDS era, a body of work that includes the sort of narrative Mavrikakis would call "*le récit empoisonné. . . un genre qu'il nous faut réinventer*" (Mavrikakis 2000, 153). From among the many authors contributing to the collection of AIDS literature, Mavrikakis singles out AIDS-infected French author Hervé Guibert, directly and indirectly paying homage to the late author and the novels he wrote about his own illness and imminent death.[4]

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[4] Ralph Sarkonak notes that Guibert actually died of complications arising from a suicide attempt, taking his own life before the illness destroying his body could (Sarkonak, 3).

Elegy and Plague Fiction

Deuils harkens back to one of the oldest and most enduring genres, the elegy, which is most commonly recognized as a poetic lament for the dead, but which has recently been expressed in the form of narrative prose. The narrative is now frequently chosen as a "means of conveying. . . the essence of an almost ubiquitous motif: the unlived life" (Engelberg, 3).

"The classic shape of English elegy is exemplified by [Milton's] 'Lycidas'", in which the poet "announces the fact of his friend's death, laments his loss, and offers consolation. This solid tripartite structure has supported centuries of mourning authors. . . . But in the modern elegy. . . the third leg of consolation wobbles precariously" (Varnes, 318). Mavrikakis's novel certainly fits this pattern, although it could just as easily be identified as an "anti-elegy," a work that results from the significant change in contemporary elegiac writing and in which the modern writer rejects the traditional form of elegy, choosing instead to "violate its norms and transgress its limits" (Ramanzani, 1). In the past, elegiac writing was the literature of "loss, mourning, and reconstruction," but writers are now distorting the genre's classical form:

> traditional plots assume a rational structure, one that can be ascertained, and that provides meaning and order. But modernist texts, unfolding not through plot but a series of discontinuous situations, questions these assumptions. In consequence, such fiction rarely tells a consoling story. . . (Friedman, 127).

Contemporary 'anti-elegists' like Catherine Mavrikakis find little to celebrate, and in their work, death is *not* glorified. The creators of this new genre actually reject the use of elegy to assuage their grief, "to translate grief into consolation" (Ramanzani, 3). Sometimes, as Mavrikakis's narrator points out, there is simply no solace to be found: "*Dans la rue, j'ai*

envie de. . . crier, de hurler ton nom: Hervé. . . mais. . . je n'avais aucune voix. Et c'est vrai, je n'ai pas la voix qu'il me faudrait pour faire voler en éclats le monde sous le cri de ton nom" (Mavrikakis 2000, 23). Thus modern adaptations of traditional elegiac writing include "any gesture that refuses orthodox consolation and inclines toward what Freud would call melancholic mourning," the very phrase we find in the novel's French title – *Deuils* (*cannibales et*) *mélancoliques* (Varnes, 318).

There *is* little comfort to be found in the end, although the act of mourning – whether it is oral or written – can sometimes "serve as a bridge between the living and the dead" (Holst-Warhaft, 29). The narrator of *Deuils* is the one "*qui pleure très fort aux enterrements*," the one who should have been an official "*pleureuse*" (Mavrikakis 2000, 131). She does play the role of lamenter, and as such she knows that "besides expressing and channelling emotion", she is "also responsible for . . . keeping the memory of the deceased alive" (Holst-Warhaft, 35). There is another beneficial or therapeutic aspect to delivering an elegy or lamentation: the literary "expression of grief is perceived by the lamenters themselves not only as an emotional outburst but as a means of mediating that emotion and thereby avoiding the excesses of madness that death might otherwise provoke" (Holst-Warhaft, 28). Mavrikakis's narrator herself confesses that she "sees writing as [her] vehicle for survival"; it keeps her sane and prevents her from committing suicide (Tougaw, 237).

AIDS surfaced in the 1980s and is still taking the lives of thousands in the most excruciating ways. In light of the number of AIDS-related deaths witnessed in recent years, it is not surprising that the historical genre of elegy has and been resurrected and recast in new forms, in spite of the fact that "this broad cultural turn to elegy is painful insofar as it attests

to the psychic and social threat of contemporary life-threatening diseases" and "betrays the pervasiveness of cultural melancholia at the end of a century that has repeatedly witnessed unimaginable loss of life" (Zeiger, 107). Timothy Murphy views elegy as a form of testimony taken up by writers tackling the subject of AIDS. Murphy elaborates by explaining that narratives that do little more than relate a story by analyzing statistics or

> demographics of race, occupation, and residence fail to be interesting or convincing. . . . Testimony is witness in front of an indifferent world about the worth and merit of persons. And thus one writes, for the world unconvinced, that someone was here and that, death notwithstanding, a presence remains (Murphy, 317).

It is not necessary that everything written about AIDS serve a social or didactic purpose; it is enough that the telling of the story helps the teller relieve the pain of loss or counter the absurdity of death. Mavrikakis's *Deuils* is an excellent example of how a contemporary author has successfully integrated aspects of traditional and modern elegy into an autobiographical tale of mourning those who die before their time.

The novel is also reminiscent of so-called 'plague literature'. Daniel Defoe's account of the bubonic plague epidemic in seventeenth-century London is one of the earliest examples of this genre. *A Journal of the Plague Year*, published in 1722, was "innovative. . . . in its form, a first-person memoire narrated by a survivor" (Brodsley, 11). *Deuils*, too, is told in the first-person by an individual left behind in the wake of AIDS, the scourge of modern times.

"One of the most potent metaphors for AIDS remains '*plague*'" since "this syndrome has profoundly affected American culture" over the past decade and a half (Jones, 73). James Jones argues that it is dangerous to ally this particular disease with the concept of a plague because this stigmatizes those most often infected, gay men, and that the use of this metaphor

in literature fills "the need for our society to blame" and to exact "retribution for sins" (Jones, 73-4). In her study of plague as a literary theme, Barbara Fass Leavy differs from Jones, saying that although the concept of 'plague' is

> traditionally associated with such ideas as sin and God's judgment on individuals and whole peoples. . . . Neither sex nor sin nor punishment for wrong. . . need be associated with a plague [because] 'the plague' conveys not only the physical agony of the disease itself, but the reverberant sense of catastrophe and reasonable despair the epidemic has unleashed (Leavy,4-5).

Susan Sontag, author of *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, observes that, 'plague' remains "the principal metaphor by which the AIDS epidemic is understood" (Sontag, 44). She concurs with Jones when she writes that AIDS "is not a mysterious affliction that seems to strike at random. Indeed to get AIDS is precisely to be revealed, in the majority of cases so far, as a member of a certain 'risk group,' a community of pariahs" made up of homosexual men and intravenous drug users whose actions are considered to be not just the result of weakness but also of "indulgence, delinquency – addictions to chemicals that are illegal and to sex regarded as deviant" (Sontag, 24).

Yet the advent of this global health crisis has given rise to the production of important literary texts and has "furthered the process. . . of bringing dying out of the closet" and bringing to the forefront the tragic experiences of a marginalized group of individuals (Friedman, 279). AIDS *is* an epidemic and it cuts down anyone and everyone unfortunate enough to fall in its path. The moment "AIDS enters the novel, it becomes slowly a plague, transforming all it touches" (Jones, 75). Catherine is not only touched but is scorched by this disease as she watches more and more of her friends die of its consequences.

AIDS *is* perhaps the first 'plague' ever to strike such terror into the hearts and minds of North-Americans. Joseph Dewey, however, claims that "as a genre, this body of plague literature. . . has little promise – there is no aesthetic beauty" to be found there because "a viral infection of this scale creates not the elegant individuality of heroes," such as those seen in traditional elegies, "but rather an overwhelming anonymity of victims, interred with statistics" (Dewey, 24-5). Mavrikakis herself speaks of the thousands of dead mechanically mourned in actuarial sums and totals, but no one would read this kind of fiction if it were not for "the balm of aesthetic pleasure" found in some elegiac and plague fiction (Varnes, 317). In his article on AIDS literature as testimony, Jason Tougaw reiterates, saying that while testimony "requires a narrative structure to ensure its own transmission from writer to audience[,] a testimony can never 'get it all down.' It must manipulate the pleasure of the text, the ruses of narrative, to ensure a warm reception" (Tougaw, 238). Mavrikakis certainly holds nothing back, but her novel is a fascinating and compelling read. In *Deuils*, stories about a succession of Hervés, their individual struggles, and their untimely deaths are as personal as they are universal, as poignant as they are coldly factual, and as illustrative of human frailty as they are of human ferocity in the face of the ultimate adversity.

Deuils cannibales et mélancoliques and AIDS-infected Literature

The genres of elegy and plague fiction can be further narrowed down to create a new classification; recently,

> writers have been moved to reveal their experiences and views of the ravages of AIDS. It may be that as writers continue to record their impressions and experiences with this disease, they are evolving a new genre of literature. . . . already common threads can be identified in the AIDS literature produced so far (Franke, 93).

In his introduction to *AIDS: The Literary Response*, editor Emmanuel Nelson outlines the unique nature of this developing genre. He describes AIDS writing as work that is

> produced in response to a puzzling and unmanageable catastrophe. . . . It is a diverse body of literature that documents, disrupts, testifies, protests, even celebrates. Its quality may be uneven but its authenticity. . . can rarely be contested. And much of the literature of AIDS constitutes feverish elegy. . . to a generation dying young (Nelson 1992, 3).

However, AIDS-related literature arises from a very different situation than do most elegies and plague narratives. This corpus is distinctive because it springs not from "strong emotion recollected in tranquility; these reports are from the combat zone" and written by those men and women serving – and watching their comrades dying – on the front lines of a war waged against an as yet incurable disease (Denneny, 46).

Often, critics and researchers studying AIDS-related writing tend to divide the genre into two categories: one in which a narrator tells either his own or someone else's story of contracting and suffering from AIDS, and one which "involves not the individual person living with HIV or AIDS but the historical trajectory of the epidemic" (Kruger, 75). Nelson divides the literature of AIDS into two different categories but stipulates that he is

concentrating mainly on fiction written by homosexual men. His first category includes "works which acknowledge the menacing presence of the plague but avoid direct, full-scale confrontation with it", and the second "include[s] novels in which it is directly confronted" (Nelson 1990, 49 and 51). Shaun O'Connell draws the line between "horrific cautionary tales of fascist responses to the AIDS crisis. . . in which writers posit scenarios of massive retaliation against homosexuals by a society. . . which seeks a Final Solution to the plague" and the "documentary, largely autobiographical records of case histories of persons with AIDS, along with the ramifications. . . for the victim's immediate family and loved ones" (O'Connell, 497). The clearest and most comprehensive analysis of the autobiographical writing about AIDS comes from Marilyn Chandler, who states that the genre

> can be divided generally into journals, narratives, essays, auto-biographical novels, short stories, and poetry. It can also be divided into that written by people with AIDS and that written by caregivers about their own perspectives. . . . And it can be divided between those whose strategy is to explore AIDS as primarily a personal and secondarily as a political issue, and those who reverse that order of significance (Chandler, 56).

Some of the features outlined in the various attempts to classify AIDS literature do correspond to *Deuils cannibales et mélancoliques*. Yet Nelson errs in claiming that very few outside the community of homosexual men have "responded to the AIDS crisis with imaginative works. . . their fiction tends to lack the power and poignancy of gay male writing on the subject" (Nelson 1990, 47). O'Connell agrees that most of this literature currently "emerges from or studies the male homosexual community" but counters that the genre will focus to a greater extent on those *outside* this community who are also affected by the burgeoning AIDS crisis (O'Connell, 502). Mavrikakis's lesbian narrator pours out a

wrenching, sensitive, and at times even humourous narrative in which she confronts other people's AIDS with candor and deep sorrow, turning *their* suffering and *her* loss into a springboard for further thought on death and dying in the twentieth – and twenty-first – centuries. Neither Mavrikakis nor her narrator is suffering from AIDS-related illnesses, nor are they at great risk, but they *are* writers and among those artists who use their creative forces to "assuage their grief and to bear witness to those destroyed" (Pastore, 5).

In their study on AIDS novels, Joseph Lévy and Alexis Nouss observe that although infection with the virus often does connect individuals to "a specific social identity," this does not occur "without consequences to the sociopsychological well-being of the survivors, insofar as the repeated bereavements lead to a generalized depressive atmosphere" and a need to find some sort of relief (Lévy and Nouss 1993, 63). Timothy Murphy confirms that while "gay men, either as authors or subjects, dominate the written word in the literature of the epidemic. . . .other people close to the devastation of AIDS. . . have also set out their encounters with illness, dying, loss, and fear" (Murphy, 307). The more friends Catherine loses, the greater her burden of grief. And the more tears she sheds, the more powerful the lure of death becomes. Writing is this storyteller's escape.

The Guibert Connection

Catherine Mavrikakis illustrates her affinity for the literary works of Hervé Guibert in various ways. Guibert, the "human face of AIDS in France," began writing in 1977 and was diagnosed as HIV-positive in 1988, but he only became a celebrity "when he appeared on Bernard Pivot's 'Apostrophes' on 16 March 1990, a French literary television program with enormous appeal," and openly discussed his personal battle with AIDS (Orban, 132). In much of his fiction, Guibert confronts his affliction and questions whether or not his writing has the power to slow his downward spiral toward death or better yet, to give him some sort of eternal life.

In *Deuils*, Mavrikakis is fairly explicit about her feelings for a certain Hervé: she writes, "*Hervé, en moi, avait trouvé son double*" (Mavrikakis 2000, 40). At their first and only meeting, Hervé asks for Catherine's help in writing "*la métaphore de la mort, celle qui dirait la vérité, celle qui apaiserait les plaies. . . . La bonne métaphore. . . que seule l'écriture lui promettait*" (Mavrikakis 2000, 41). Because the narrator must also serve as executor of author Hervé's "*livres posthumes*" and as "*critique littéraire de ses oeuvres*," because she must help him live on after his death, Mavrikakis can only be referring to Guibert (Mavrikakis 2000, 41). Later in the novel, Catherine mentions Guibert's *À l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* (*À l'ami*) and identifies *herself* as "*l'ami qui n'a pas sauvé la vie de personne*" (Mavrikakis 2000, 136).

Boulé labels Guibert's novels 'AIDS narratives': works "written through the agency of the *roman faux* (a novel in which *je* (I) tells lies" and in which the intentional confusion of fact and falsehood gives the author the freedom to reveal his innermost self (Boulé 1999,

193). In other words, "the line between narrator and author is erased in Guibert, which literalizes the process through which all writing, including the most pure autobiography, becomes fiction through the act of writing" (Orban, 133). While these ideas are applicable to both Guibert's *and* Mavrikakis's work, I prefer Ralph Sarkonak's analysis of Guibert's writing because he recognizes it as innovative and distinguishable from other kinds of literature. He suggests that Guibert's novels belong to a new genre, "one that combines one better known in English-speaking countries – AIDS fiction – and a French one – autofiction, that is, factual fiction" (Sarkonak, 156). This new branch of literature is thus dubbed 'AIDS autofiction' and is characterized as

> *a work of literary creation in which the author describes, through a fiction, the physical and mental pain of living with AIDS based on direct personal experience; although such a work is fictional, it is nonetheless based on first-person testimony by a witness whose name is identical with that of the author*(Sarkonak, 156-7).[5]

'Hervé Guibert' is the narrator of Guibert's AIDS autofiction just as 'Catherine', the one who holds herself responsible for mourning the deaths of all Hervés, narrates Catherine Mavrikakis's novel. In both Guibert's *À l'ami* and Mavrikakis's *Deuils cannibales et mélancoliques*, "*il y a une multiplication des Hervé et des Hervé Guibert et la nomination semble toujours être liée à la proximité de la mort*" (Mavrikakis 1993, 148).

For both sets of authors and narrators, the act of writing is essential to the continuation of their lives: Guibert needs to express the pain of living with AIDS, while Mavrikakis attempts to relieve the pain of living among people dying of AIDS. What else

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[5] Italics appear in Sarkonak's text.

drives these two authors to write, to confide in their readers their most private concerns, to commit their tortured thoughts to paper? In Guibert's case, "AIDS gives the narrator a reason to. . . write, and writing, in turn, becomes a way to understand the illness in all its manifestations" (Orban, 141). Ironically, he wants desperately to survive but risks his life in order to continue writing. In *À l'ami*, the narrator Guibert actually delays AZT treatments in order to prolong his physical ability to write, even though this decision in favour of literature may drastically shorten his life. In *Cytomégalovirus* [6], the narrator's greatest fear is blindness since "blindness means not being able read and not being able to write" (Orban, 144). Writing these accounts allows Guibert and his eponymous narrator to combat the effects of the illness 'out loud'. The illness allows them to focus on the history of their own deterioration and death – and the "choice becomes very much clearer: either the writing of a new book or suicide" (Boulé 1999, 199). For both, writing functions as a form of salvation, an outlet for unbearable suffering; at least it keeps the writer alive, if only temporarily.

Mavrikakis's narrator explains that her book "*est là pour que mes larmes se transforment en mots*" (Mavrikakis 2000, 131). This process is an essential one, Catherine explains, "*car dire la chose à dire me serait insoutenable, impossible. J'écris pour distraire ma douleur, pour ne pas en parler*" (Mavrikakis 2000, 153). Guibert also believes that "writing serves to admit to the unsayable" (Boulé 1999, 197). The Hervé Guibert narrating *À l'ami* uses his infection with AIDS as the impetus for his self-proclaimed "*projet de*

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6 Cytomegalovirus is related to the chicken pox and herpes viruses, but "for people with AIDS it can result in severe intestinal, lung or ocular disorders" (Reider and Ruppelt, 240). Guibert used the term as the title of a novel published in 1992.

dévoilement de soi et de l'énoncé de l'indicible"(Guibert, 247). Even though Catherine, like Mavrikakis, is fully aware that even the greatest literature is but a dull blade in the fight against unspeakable suffering, she clearly turns to writing when she needs relief. Writing is the activity through which Catherine and her creator can safely express their deepest and most dangerous emotions: the written word keeps them both from falling into the depths of despair or the tempting arms of oblivion.

Oblivion – a place devoid of all pain and memory – is accessible through suicide, an act both Hervé Guibert and Catherine Mavrikakis have contemplated, attempted, or written about at one time or another. Catherine, the narrator Mavrikakis has created in her own image, explains that although she writes in part to stave off yet another depression, she may end up taking her own life in spite of it all (Mavrikakis 2000, 153). Therefore she also writes to resist the lure of "*tous les suicides et tous les morts qui nous appellent sans cesse*" (Mavrikakis 2000, 153-4).

Catherine also suggests that suicidal tendencies are hereditary and that even if all she lacks is the courage to commit the act, at least she has the courage to write honestly about the subject. Neither the suicide of her neighbour, Hervé the pedophilic psychoanalyst, nor that of her own lecherous grandfather arouse her sympathy; she feels little but contempt for these suicides but has strong feelings for all those who die of AIDS and other calamitous causes. The first pair earns her indifference; the second group earns her affection, even though she knows she is more likely to end up "*suicidée que sidéenne*" (Mavrikakis 2000, 58). Notably, Catherine then points out that of all people, even "*Hervé Guibert lui-même a préféré en finir avant la fin qui n'arrivait qu'à petits pas sournois et horribles*," a subtle statement about the

facts of Guibert's death (Mavrikakis 2000, 58).

As if the fixation on death in Guibert's and Mavrikakis's novels is not enough, images of cannibalism in both literal and literary form are included in the works of these two authors. As a literary trope, anthropophagy – the eating of human flesh – "entails a tribute to the other's strength that one wishes to have combined with one's own for greater vitality" (Vieira, 96). In fiction, anthropophagy can be interpreted as "a critical, poetic and ideological operation," the one through which Mavrikakis ingests Guibert and his fiction (Vieira, 102). She then pays him tribute by writing her own '*roman guibertien*', creatively imitating his penchant for literary allusion, his belief in the power of numbers, and his predilection for cannibalistic imagery itself.

In *Le Protocole compassionnel*, part of Guibert's AIDS trilogy, the author says that he cannot write without making references to someone else's writing (Sarkonak, 185). It is clear that this is also true for Mavrikakis, since her first novel is so obviously an homage to Guibert and the kind of AIDS literature he produced. Mavrikakis alludes to authors and intellectuals throughout *Deuils*, mentioning, among others, poet Stéphane Mallarmé; the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud; philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Martin Heidegger; gay theorist Michel Foucault, and writers Marguerite Duras and Hervé Guibert himself.

One of the most interesting and amusing examples of the use of allusion occurs when Catherine tells the story of one of her Hervés, an AIDS-stricken author penning his last novel from the confines of his hospital room and hoping to survive one last summer so that he can complete his work. This scenario is identical to the one the real Hervé Guibert lived out at the end of his life, 'dying' to finish a novel. The fictional Hervé sardonically remarks that, like

Proust, he is unsure whether or not "*nous aurons le temps*", making this a reference within a reference. This time, it is to the sickly French author and his celebrated novel, *À la recherche du temps perdu* (Mavrikakis 2000, 43). Marcel Proust endured periods of illness throughout his life and spent the last years of his life bedridden and struggling to perfect his literary oeuvre before dying.[7]

Numbers play a significant role in Guibert's fiction, just as they do in Mavrikakis's. Those found in Guibert's novels often pertain to "the numerous medical tests and the results obtained, especially the all-important T-cell count. . . the dates and times of appointments . . . . not to mention Hervé's weight. . . . numbers serve to remind the reader just how quantifiable life" and death can be (Sarkonak, 176-7). Guibert then defuses the power of these numbers and figures by depriving them of their scientific significance and "attributing a special meaning to certain 'magical numbers'" (Sarkonak, 177). These figures are designed to serve as Guibert's protective shield.

Whereas Guibert's special numbers have life-sustaining connotations, Mavrikakis's frequent discussion of numbers, dates, and statistics seem only to strengthen her affiliation with death. Catherine cannot resist or deny their truth, and she defines herself as "a date machine. . . a mechanism recording numbers and figures. . . the perforator punching out the days" (Mavrikakis 2000, 30). Earlier in *Deuils*, Catherine describes the death of a twenty year old woman who is killed by a car driven by a seventy-nine year old motorist, and she notes

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[7] Furthermore, Proust's narrator bears the author's first name, as do the narrators in Guibert's and Mavrikakis's novels, leading critics to wonder to what extent *À la recherche du temps perdu* is autobiographical (www.studiocleo.com/librairie/proust/crtittext.html Shattuck, Roger. "The Work and its Author" from Roger Shattuck's *Marcel Proust*, originally published by Viking Press in 1974).

ironically that the poor girl was, at the time of her demise, working as an actuary for an insurance company which had just entrusted her with the accidental deaths file. The deceased had thus been analyzing the statistics concerning her own imminent death, leading Catherine to ask, "Who says numbers have nothing to tell us?" (Mavrikakis 2000, 25).

Even when the narrator mentions an 'irrational' number, it is linked to death rather than to life. As a child, she tells her mother that she knows she will die soon, at the age of twelve or thirteen, and that she will not go beyond this number. She then asks herself "*D'où . . . . avais-je pris ces chiffres magiques qui réglerent mon enfance?*" (Mavrikakis 2000, 121). In spite of the differences, Mavrikakis appears to have integrated and transformed Guibert's fixation with the potency of numbers into her own.

Numerous as well are the instances when Guibert and his 'disciple' make direct or symbolic use of anthropomorphic imagery. In her article, "*Le sida, puisqu'il faut l'appeler par son nom. . .*", Mavrikakis discusses the moment in *Le Protocole compassionnel* when Guibert "*doit amorcer le deuil de lui et lorsqu'il n'est pas dépressif et anorexique, il se met à faire revivre sa bouche. . .*" (Mavrikakis 1993, 154). The narrator claims that when he sees the beautiful body of a shirtless workman, he wants more than just a taste: he wants to bite into, to voraciously devour, chew, ingest, swallow up the warm living flesh, the object of his desire and symbol of all that he has lost. But even cannibalism cannot fill his empty mouth nor replenish his AIDS-racked body; the image is intended instead to denote the void and to celebrate it in words (Mavrikakis 1993, 156).

Guibert hopes that his words can become a force strong enough to combat the destructive, devouring power of AIDS, but sadly, the virus is the greatest cannibal of all. It

sups on its victims and all they have ingested. Thus Guibert's life and his literary output finally bow before the all-powerful flesh-eating virus.

Mavrikakis has looked carefully at both the expression of Guibert's cannibalistic urge and its existence as a metaphor in his works. Their intensity becomes her own: she understands "*la métaphore de la voracité*," absorbs it, transforms it, and makes it her own (Mavrikakis 1993, 150). In her hands, cannibalism comes to represent the difficult relationship between Catherine and the dead who haunt her thoughts and dreams. As in Guibert's novels, there is a struggle for ascendence as the narrator of *Deuils* strives to survive death's appetite for living beings and to avoid choking on the memories of the myriad dead. Catherine proposes a path to winning this eternal battle:

> *Il faut face aux morts avoir grand-faim, il faut être cannibale et les bouffer tout rond ou les déchirer de nos dents avides. Il faut avaler nos morts ou c'est eux qui nous bouffent. . . . c'est la loi de la jungle et du deuil. . . . Devant la mort, il faut être affamé, avide, les mains grandes ouvertes. . . . La mort est un festin. . .* (Mavrikakis 2000, 124).

Catherine will not let death and its victims surreptitiously gain the upper hand, and so she is vigilant and destroys them before they can do the same to her. Moreover, Catherine realizes that she must feel a deep human connection to others and improve her capacity to keep their memories alive – without giving in to the temptation to join them – before she can mourn their passing and let them go.

Translating *Deuils cannibales et mélancoliques*

> [T]he roster of authors who deliberately set out to describe and evaluate homosexual relations is tiny when compared to the number of authors who have looked the other way as they wrote. . . . Nevertheless, there have always been men and women who wrote boldly about homosexuality (Kellogg, 3)

The French have a long history of including so-called 'gay writing' – literature dealing with homosexuality – in their literary canon; "French writers have repeatedly elaborated, through explicit narrative. . . on various aspects of homosexual experience," thus "reorder[ing] our thinking about language and its intricate relationship to sexuality and society" (Stambolian and Marks, 25-6). The emergence of AIDS in the mid-1980s seriously altered the views of French writers. "With the weapons of art, [artists and authors] may believe they can withstand the virus – at least for a moment", as did Hervé Guibert, the most renowned French author to choose AIDS as his subject (Martel, 278). The gay liberation movement in the United States further influenced the way writers approached the subject of homosexuality in their work so that it stimulated authors on both sides of the Atlantic to begin examining the effect of homosexuality on language and literature.

This leads to the following question: "if writing about homosexual experience is not established generically in a given culture, is gay writing from another culture likely to suffer repression or more subtle forms of censorship and transformation in translation?" (Harvey, 139). To date, there has been little or no research done on the translation of literature treating homosexual subject matter, so it is virtually impossible to judge "how generalisable across cultures and periods is the notion of 'gay writing'" or to what extent it "suffer[s] from a particular 'translation deficit' in a given culture" (Harvey, 147-8). In the case of *Deuils*

cannibales et mélancoliques, French-Canadian attitudes toward homosexuality do not differ greatly from those emanating from the English-speaking population with which it shares a geographical location. Because there is a reduced risk of ethnocentricity altering *Deuils*, the novel passes fairly easily from one culture into another with its translation from French to English.

The translation of Mavrikakis's novel into English seems appropriate for a work that could benefit from a wider audience and one that deserves to be shared with a greater readership. Opting for North American English instead of its British counterpart for this translation is comparable to choosing Quebec's French over France's: in both cases, the languages have long been separated by history and an ocean. The translation of both English and French literature in Quebec is said to help bridge two solitudes divided by their languages, histories, and cultures. Although I cannot say I particularly focused on the political aspect of this issue during the translation process, I often thought about my work as an attempt to bridge the personal distance between author and translator.

English is reputedly the dominant language on a global level, and as Suzanne Jill Levine has observed, the choice of American English in particular gives the translator a versatile tool. It can be colloquial, colourful, and fanciful, but it also means business, as it has for centuries been the "language of merchants and mathematicians" (Levine, 18). The choice of a variably earthy, neutral, passionate, and scholarly English is perfectly suited to Mavrikakis's fiction.

In any language, finding the author's voice is perhaps the most essential challenge in trying to recapture the essence of an original text in its translation. Ironically, the voice of

Catherine Mavrikakis's narrator is unpredictable, adapting to her state of mind, like the American English I have chosen for her to speak. One moment Catherine is rational and grounded, concerned with the facts and statistics that govern life and death; the next, she's extreme, relying on her own dreams to define reality and desperately mourning the loss of her Hervés. She is a chameleon who shifts from cynicism to sorrow, from lunacy to logic. She speaks with reckless abandon as well as with great lucidity, thus making it impossible for a translator to identify a single appropriate tone or level of language.

Consequently Catherine's voice has a distinctly theatrical quality to it. This, coupled with the fact that hers is a first-person narrative, gives the impression that *Deuils* is not only a novel, but also a dramatic monologue, and the "translation of narrative fiction and that of dramatic fiction have many problems in common" (Link, 24). A playwright uses various levels of speech for "particular purposes" and like the author of this novel, "makes his characters speak the language of his own time and country, even if they represent either people of another time or from another language group" (Link, 26). Hence for the individual attempting to translate such texts, the traditionally held precept that a translator has to "decide on the *register*. . . and maintain this register consistently throughout" is of little use (Duff, 7).

In the original French, Catherine's discourse represents a multiplicity of language levels; she rants, sermonizes, expounds, and chats, always addressing her monologue to the invisible audience, her readers. It seems logical that the English translation should reflect this roller-coaster effect without losing sight of the fact that the narrator's role in *Deuils* is to speak immediately and intimately as well as descriptively. Since "the reader, generally, cannot compare" the original to its translation, "in his judgement, he has only his native ear to go by",

and that receptive 'ear' is an essential consideration in the process of translation (Duff, 1). If we believe that the French text could be as easily spoken *to* us as read *by* us, the translated version must come across as being equally speakable.

My solution was similar to that outlined by Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood in her comments on the translation of Nicole Brossard's complex novel, *Désert mauve*. Lotbinière-Harwood determined that her "target-language version must not flatten the characters' strangeness" (Lotbinière-Harwood, 61). She accepted Brossard's style and unusual syntactical constructions at face value and translated them quite directly in order to allow the originality of the author's voice to permeate the English text. She, however, chose a "non-American vocabulary" even though, "as Antoine Berman has stated. . . translations are generally expected to be written in a more normative language than the original work" (Lotbinière-Harwood, 61- 62). The challenge is to maintain the essence of the author's text in its translation without alienating any potential publisher or target audience by creating a text that is too radical or difficult to read. Brossard's own fictional translator, Maude Laures, reminds herself – and every translator – that her task is to reconstitute the fiction by "cover[ing] every word with another in such a way that the first one not sink into oblivion" (Brossard, 61).

Connected to the question of voice is the problem of identifying and rendering the changing levels of language which correspond to the narrator's varying attitudes or moods. When Catherine is extremely agitated, for example, her words pour out in a deluge and sometimes become quite crude. Early in the novel, she learns from Flora that one of her Hervés has died and is buried in the cemetery at Montmartre; she feels obliged to visit his grave, even though she is terrified of the longing for death that cemetery visits arouse in her.

In her panic, she curses her dead friend: "*T'es rien qu'un hostie enculé, Hervé!*" (Mavrikakis 2000, 15). A similar form of swearing – one that combines references to the Catholic mass and a sexual act – does not exist in English, so that finding the proper level of language to replace this kind of sentence is a challenge.

On the other hand, the level of language is not necessarily more easily identified when the narrator appears calmer. While recounting the death of a certain Hervé, Catherine stoically lists his date of birth, his date of death, and describes how this man once dreamed about dying in the early morning, "*assassiné par un amant de passage dans un «*tourist room*»*" (Mavrikakis 2000, 31). Although 'transient lover' fits with 'tourist room' and the sentence's standard level of language, the more vernacular 'one-night-stand' seems preferable. The nonchalance of this colloquialism provides the perfect foil to the painful sentences found later in the same paragraph in which we learn that while Hervé does die "*étouffé d'étreintes*," his killer is not a man, nor is it even human. The author gravely states that the killer bears "*un nom latin, «Pneumocystis carinii»*" (Mavrikakis 2000, 31). This disease is the "parasitic infection of the lungs which results in persistent fever and bronchial congestion" and is "the most common specific infection that meets the case definition for AIDS" (Reider and Ruppelt, 241).

Lucy Pagé unwittingly raises another translation issue in her review of *Deuils* when she comments that the reading of this book "*demande aux lectrices, aux lecteurs une culture générale*" (Pagé). She could easily add that the same demand for comprehension of the author's cultural and literary allusions is made on anyone attempting to translate *Deuils*. For example, a basic knowledge of the tenets held by Martin Heidegger, the German philosopher

frequently mentioned in the novel, is useful to understanding and, consequently, to translating phrases such as "*. . . la bureaucratie ou encore la comptabilité voilent notre rapport à l'être pour la mort* (Mavrikakis 2000, 24-5). Here, Mavrikakis refers to Heidegger's analysis of human 'being' and how it is influenced by anxiety, alienation, and death. The translation of this sentence must be less literal and hence reads: ". . . bureaucracy, or better yet, accounting, masks the connection between human existence and death."

Later, the author casually quotes French poet Charles Baudelaire: "*«Nos repentirs sont lâches et nous faisons payer grassement nos aveux», comme l'a écrit Baudelaire en toute connaissance de cause*" (Mavrikakis 2000. 56). Making slight changes. Mavrikakis cites an extract from the second verse of *Au lecteur*. the poem that prefaces Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*:

> *Nos péchés sont têtus. nos repentirs sont lâches* ;
> *Nous nous faisons payer grassement nos aveux*
> *Et nous rentrons gaiement dans le chemin bourbeux.*
> *Croyant par de vils pleurs laver toutes nos taches*
> (Baudelaire. 39).

Au lecteur serves as an introduction to a collection of eighteen poems that.as Frédéric de Scitivaux comments, "*rend parfaitement compte du projet poétique de Baudelaire : extraire la beauté du mal, transfigurer par le travail poétique l'expérience douleureuse de l'âme humaine en proie aux malheurs de l'existence*" (Baudelaire, 33).

Death is a central theme in *Les Fleurs du mal*. along with its motifs, "*crime. cadavre. putréfaction. cimetières. charognes. tombeaux*", and in this. Mavrikakis closely parallels Baudelaire (Baudelaire. 281). She too seeks to decipher the symbols from the tangible world "*pour. . . atteindre le monde spirituel*" and recognizes that human motivations are not always

genuine (Baudelaire, 32). Knowing the context of the citation contributes greatly to our understanding of Mavrikakis's text.[8] Familiarity with the literature produced by writers such as Hervé Guibert, Michel Foucault, Marguerite Duras, and Thomas Bernhard (among others), whose works are interrelated and related to Mavrikakis's novel, is also useful to both the reader and the translator of *Deuils*.[9]

The mention of better-known personalities such as Princess Diana, Mother Theresa, and Mick Jagger cause fewer problems for the reader of English. However, Mavrikakis also makes casual comments about individuals such as "*la défunte doyenne des Français*" (Mavrikakis 2000, 26). She is referring to the oldest woman known to be living in France in the 1990s, easily identified as Jean Calvert by those well versed in contemporary French culture, but there is simply no equivalent in North-American culture. I considered leaving the phrase in the original French and inserting an explanatory footnote into the translation, but have chosen instead to let the narrative context provide a sufficient explanation of the reference.

Puns, rhymes, and plays on words often contribute to the irony and twisted humour of Mavrikakis's novel, indispensable elements in a book that would, without them, become as unbearably heavy as the narrator's own sorrow. Moreover, Suzanne Jill Levine points out that "Freud makes us see that jokes signal something censured. . . . Puns hide (hence reveal) pain" (Levine, 13). In her comments on translating fiction, Levine comments that these very

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8 It is interesting to note that in 1857, Baudelaire was convicted of charges brought against him for the publication of *Les Fleurs du mal* and fined for "*outrage à la morale publique et aux bonnes moeurs*" (Baudelaire, 26).

9 Guibert, for example, considered Bernhard to be his inspiration for the writing of *À l'ami*.

elements – "puns, slang, parodies, and allusions, progressing in a zig-zag motion toward the most difficult" – are the "literary elements that strike us as untranslatable" (Levine, 9). Certainly they are difficult, if not impossible, to carry into an English translation. For example, in the sentence "*Encore un mort à annoncer, encore une mort à fossoyer*", Mavrikakis uses masculine and feminine forms of *mort* to play on one word whose gendered article alters its meaning (Mavrikakis 2000, 22). This is obviously a game that cannot be played in English; the sentence "Another death to announce, another dead body to bury" is accurate but does not reflect the French wordplay.

A rhyme appears in the phrase "*À cause de mon ton, à cause de mon nom. . .*" (Mavrikakis 2000, 34). In the preceding sentences, the narrator – trying to understand why Hervé, the *metteur en scène*, has chosen her to be executor of his will – sees only a certain randomness in his decision. Would it be impossible to maintain the rhyme in English without completely changing the meaning? Because such plays on words often "place sound above meaning", I tried using 'my game' and 'my name', but all sense was lost (Levine, 13). The literal equivalent of the French, "Because of my tone, because of my name. . .", failed to convey the full meaning of the phrase, so I finally opted for a looser translation and wrote "Because of the way I sound, because of who I am."

The series of brief imperative sentences, "*Dire. Ne pas dire. Comprendre. Laisser entendre. M'entends-tu? Ne dis rien.*" causes two translation problems at once (Mavrikakis 2000, 32). While it is easy to repeat the verb *dire* three times, it is virtually impossible to duplicate the repetition of the syllable *en(d)* found once in *comprendre* and twice in both *entendre* and *entends*. There is also a sort of play on the verb in the imperative "*Laisser*

entendre." and the question "*M'entends-tu?*" Several solutions are possible, but I have chosen to imitate the repetition of the French syllable by repetitive use of the 's' sound: "Say it. Don't say it. Understand. Let it be understood without speaking. Do you hear me? Say nothing."

As I finished the first draft of this translation, I realized that because I was trying to bridge the linguistic gap between French and English, I encountered one of the most basic difficulties of the translation process: resolving the tension between creating an English text that is totally faithful to the original and creating one that reflects more my own style of writing. Was I to maintain 'foreignness' or to naturalize it to make it more palatable for the average English-speaker? While I did endeavour to adjust syntax and vocabulary to fit English standards, I often felt the urge to perk up some of Mavrikakis's vocabulary with some interesting synonyms. I refrained, reminding myself that the repetition of certain adjectives and verbs is appropriate to the author's style and intent. The repetitions of the word '*mort*' (as noun and adjective), the vernacular insult '*salope*', the phrase '*Il y a. . .*', and the name '*Hervé*' are, in fact, essential to the impact of Mavrikakis's novel; they become a mantra, the funereal beat of a drum rhythmically punctuating the air.

Even rendering something as simple as the name of Catherine's dog, Sud, became an issue in the debate between foreignness and ethnocentricity. The word itself means 'south', but whether left in the original French or literally translated into English, it has no relevance to the text. Unfortunately, a unilingual Anglophone reader will pronounce the name 'sud', which will probably bring to mind images of either beer or soapy, bubbly water. Adding a final 'e' to *Sud* would bring the pronunciation closer to the French ('süd' as in 'rude') might be a better choice if the novel were aimed at a wider readership in English Canada and the United

States. The literal translation 'South' seems heavy-handed and does nothing to improve the comprehension of the text. The debate continued up until the time of final revision, when I finally opted to leave 'Sud' alone, untranslated and unaltered.

Finding a title was one of the most difficult parts of translating Mavrikakis's *Deuils cannibales et mélancoliques*, and so I left it until I had completed translating a full fifty pages of this 200-page novel. While the French title may seem *accrochant* to the uninitiated, the more I became involved in the book, the harder it became to assign it an English title that was not only adequate and appropriate but also intriguing. The titles of novels, such as Mann's *Death in Venice* and Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, "often proclaim death's centrality in storytelling", whereas "other titles reveal their thanatological significance only after we have read the texts they subtend" (Friedman, 5). I wanted my title to fall somewhere in between these two extremes as does Mavrikakis's. One simple sentence that appears midway through *Deuils*, "*Il faut avaler nos morts ou c'est eux qui nous bouffent*", turned out to be a good indication of what the title, *Deuils cannibales et mélancoliques*, suggests (Mavrikakis, 124). Nevertheless, I decided to translate the individual words in the title, to find synonyms and words related to each one, and to compile a list of possibilities. The following is a partial list of the results:

> ***Deuils*** : mourning, grief (grievous), bereavement, heartbreak, lamentation, sorrow, rue
> ***cannibales*** : man-eater, eating, consuming, devouring, gnawing, banquet, dining, feasting, swallowing
> ***mélancoliques*** : melancholy, blue, woeful, heavyhearted, heartsick, depressing, dejected, gloomy, despondent dark

I reminded myself that "a title should open the reader to possibilities" and "impel the

reader to undertake the voyage of the text" by suggesting appropriate associations (Levine, 18). I kept the author's title and text in mind while trying not to be totally depressing or repugnant, and came up with a wide variety of possibilities: *Mourning Daily*, *Melancholy Mourning*, *Mourning Meal*, *Living Death*, *Dining on Death*, *A Feast of Lamentations*, *A Wake in the Mourning*, *Conquer the Mourning*, *Sorrow's Banquet*, and *Serving Death*. I rather liked the idea of a 'banquet' and the Freudian implications of 'melancholy mourning', although I found the pun on 'mourning/morning' a bit too strained or obvious. I haven't made a final choice yet, but for the purpose of this thesis, I selected *A Feast of Lamentations* for the English translation of Catherine Mavrikakis's *Deuils cannibales et mélancoliques*.

Conclusion

Catherine Mavrikakis and I are both American-born women; we both live in Montréal and have connections with the *Département d'études françaises* at Concordia University, I as a student and she as a professor. Yet our two lives could hardly be more different nor our experiences with death more divergent. Perhaps this is at the root of my interest in *Deuils cannibales et mélancoliques*; I needed to know who could have written such a book and why.

Mavrikakis's first novel is all about death and mourning. Élène Cliche's commentary on the work of Québec poet Louise Cotnoir is applicable to *Deuils cannibales et mélancoliques* as well:

> *le désenchantement qui, dans son écriture, entend la mort partout. . . met à jour une douleur, un cri, une lamentation discursive, tout en opérant simultanément son propre détournement vers la légèrté. . . même si cela n'est esquissé que timidement. Elle fait voir une femme qui. . . s'exhume du charnier* (Cliche, 49).

Deuils is graced with a very unusual narrator who recounts everything she knows about death and the ensuing grief, and as she 'talks', she unveils radically different aspects of her personality. Catherine can be mercilessly blunt about the statistics that inform us that sooner or later, we all must die. Yet she also suffers from the almost unbearable pain of loss: too many of those around her have died young, leaving her alone to mourn and to remember them. Through Catherine, the author raises the experience of AIDS – and of death in general – *beyond* the level of narrative to "the level of requiem" (O'Connell, 502). And still Catherine holds on to life, her dark humour and acute sense of irony sometimes so extreme that even she no longer knows whether to laugh or cry.

With *Deuils cannibales et mélancoliques*, Catherine Mavrikakis does put an end to

the glorification of suffering – there is no beauty in the deaths she describes. Putting her personal story into words is

> what way there is to resist the absurdity of suffering and death . . . .[hers is] a necessary voice and one that has moral import even where it reveals only the homely truths that we deserve better than we get, that we mourn more than the world can know, that we are each other's only refuge (Murphy, 319).

With *Deuils cannibales et mélancoliques*, Mavrikakis takes us on a roller-coaster ride through an emotional landscape strewn with the dead, only in the end giving us a hopeful hint that there may be life after death here on Earth. The novel is indeed a lament for the new millennium.

A Feast of Lamentations

Translated from the French by Kathryn Gabinet-Kroo

No, the living have no pity on the dead

And what would the dead do with the pity of the living

For the heart of the living is hard as a living tree

and they go their strong and vivid way

Though the heart of the dead lies bleeding

and stricken with grief

And all a prey to blows, too open to blows

with its uncovered carcass

For the living going their way have no pity on the dead

who remains with their hearts uncovered to the wind.

Saint-Denys Garneau
«La mort grandissante»
Translated by John Glassco
(Garneau, 161)

To a,
To e,
To i,
To o,
To you,

To Hervé.

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I find out a friend has died as regularly as other people pick losing lottery numbers. This week I lost another Hervé, which was to be expected, statistically speaking: all my friends are named Hervé and are, for the most part, HIV positive.

Death cloaked in statistics brings no relief, especially from its unpredictability.

I can't get used to death. I never see it coming. Hervé's death hit me like that: Bang. Bang, "You're dead". It's a bang that never fails to surprise me. A bang heard over and over again.

I feel guilty that I am still alive and yet I will also die. It's statistically predictable. But what does that give us in the way of assurances?

When I said Hervé's name in front of Flora, I knew I would soon be hearing the worst. She immediately put her hand out in search of the table's edge, and her body sagged dangerously under the weight of the words she barely managed to speak: "It's horrible, horrible for his parents . . ." I'm sure she was thinking of her own children, who are the same age as Hervé was and are now parents themselves, whose names have been inscribed on her family tree and whose deaths she could never, ever, bear to see. As for me, all that came to me were Flora's fears, her family, the marriages, the births, and in the furthest reaches of my mind, I could almost see Hervé, a tiny little Hervé. Something vague. Hervé lying on a sofa, his body as it was ten years ago, already too thin and set in a dignified pose. . . the kind, I suppose, that death and embalmers bestow. "It happened so fast," Flora stammered, crying. "He didn't say a thing to his parents, not a word, nothing. Then a week before he died, he had someone call them. It's weird, keeping them out of it, no? And then at the last minute. . . you

never know. . . ." My image of this Hervé is getting mixed up with that of another one who died two years ago, whom I must have seen exposed to the elements in his black coffin and grey shirt. Hervé is dead, and it's the body of a different Hervé that comes back to haunt me just as Flora tells me through her tears how her son Benjamin delivered the news of Hervé's death. "Hervé's death." How many more times will I have to hear that? Yet it's a well-known scenario. A familiar phrase. All too familiar. I forget what it means each time another Hervé dies.

"Hervé was at our daughter's wedding last summer. He seemed fine then. . . as if . . . " What on earth was Hervé doing at a wedding? He hated families and happy marriages and only tolerated me because I'm silent and suffer life's sorrows. What on earth was he doing at Marie's wedding? He already knew he was sick and would soon die, yet he couldn't discuss his illness with anyone under any circumstances. What possessed him to show up at that twit Marie's wedding when he was the one who felt compelled to destroy other people's marital bliss? What was he thinking? I'll never know, because I know nothing about death except what my sick or dead friends have taught me about it, and they never told me how to understand the irrationality of our lives and our deaths. With them, I learn how *not* to understand a thing; most important, I learn not to understand their deaths. I refuse to understand. I refuse to submit to any kind of prescribed knowledge or to any possible rationale. Death is an outrage. I can't do anything about it. That's just the way it is.

I am a numbskull, bewildered by death; I can't get it through my thick head.

I must be looking at Flora with the face of a fool, the face of a hysteric, the face of an imbecile, my head full of long days of torment and pacts with the Devil, because I feel her fear

of me growing. She asks me to sit down. I stare at her, my haggard eyes in their sockets still roaming across something that looks like Hervé's body, shrunken up to ridiculously minuscule proportions, and I have the gall to ask her, "What did Hervé die of?" I know the answer by heart, having already heard it from a number of other Hervés. But with each Hervé, I want to hear it again. I yearn possessively for that word, which reassures me yet disgusts me with its familiar proximity. I crave it: AIDS. This is the word Flora mutters or maybe I said it: AIDS, our enemy and lifelong companion. Maybe I'm talking, maybe it's the disease that speaks through me, Flora, through life in general. Because it seems to me that for years now, we haven't talked about anything but AIDS – it eats us up alive, it's a ventriloquist making his dummy speak.

Hervé's image fades, as if devoured by some photographic acid. I see a grave, flowers petrified by the frost. The solidity of the stone. Crosses. Grey. Nothing. The cemetery and the first name 'Hervé'. That's all. I've already forgotten Hervé's last name, even though Flora has been saying it over and over since the beginning of this absurd conversation.

"Where is Hervé buried?" The question shivers through my body and makes me sit there squirming around in every direction and in every sense of the word. There I am, turned into a witch burning at the stake of truth, a witch who continues to writhe, possessed. Flora talks on as if nothing had happened, expounding on the subject of Hervé's parents; she cannot stop herself from reporting on their sorrows, their tremendous grief. Terrified by the meaning of such gloomy, piteous remarks, I ask, "Where is Hervé?"

"In the Montmartre cemetery." Of course he's there. Of course: he always wanted me to go there with him on his walks, there where I so often refused to go. At the time, I thought

that strolls in the cemetery were too much in harmony with my erratic moods, with my crazy thirst for violent death, with my frenzied attempts at spectacular suicide. Such walks were dangerous for me. I was the one who had dreams strewn with cadavers, who saw the night and the earth open up and swallow me whole, the one so close to the stone grave that I refused to go on playing with death or to be seduced by its stillness, its solemnity. . . You're nothing but another dead asshole, Hervé! And here I am, forced forevermore to visit you at Montmartre whenever I'm in France. Here I am, obliged to go to the cemetery. . . Not only that, but you won't even be there with me to laugh at my fears and superstitions, my madness; you won't be there to remind me of death's absurdity. I'll have to walk that path alone – alone or with Olga or maybe the dog, if dogs are allowed into French cemeteries, which I doubt. They must go completely nuts with all those bones buried under stone, especially with the stench of rotting flesh that would make them slobber and drool even more.

As far as I can recall, Hervé despised dogs. Once we're dead, people quickly forget our likes and dislikes. If Hervé hated dogs the way I remember he did, it would really be a vengeful turn to visit his grave with mine. I need to make him pay for dying on me. I need to insult him, to go spit on his grave or have my dog piss on his epitaph. I need to retaliate in some stupid way, but for what?

A long time ago, Hervé said he "would not, should not, could not" see me anymore. He had decided a long time ago to cast me into the black silence created by his disappearance so that I would feel, as he explained in his last letter, a certain malaise.

The first time Hervé disappeared, I didn't react. I let time pass just as you might politely let someone pass in front of you. I was secretly convinced that one day I'd see him

again and that we'd explain ourselves to each other. I did not want to give in to his terrorism or his frantic desire to scare me.

He insisted that I speak the truth, as Heidegger would have it. He wouldn't let me get away with idle chatter, woolgathering, or trivial thoughts, and I suspect that he wanted me to speak to him in German from time to time. I never liked Heidegger. I have no affinity for the Black Forest and even less for paths that lead nowhere. I only like trips by airplane or rocket ship and cheerless cities where you die, face flat against dingy concrete sidewalks. All my university friends are Heideggerians. Me, I like to talk and especially to yell when I have nothing at all to say. I'm allergic to German: it reminds me of the war movies I saw when I was a kid. I also hate Greek, poetry, and the great outdoors.

Besides, I could never be a Heideggerian, even if I wanted to. The Heideggerians would denounce me on the spot. The revelation of 'being' makes me yawn with boredom, and Hervé bored me too, whenever he threw himself into one of his philosophical frenzies. I preferred listening to Mahler's *Kindertotenleider* with him. Together, we mocked the inane, catatonic look on the faces of music lovers and acquired by musicians through deep concentration.

We could allow ourselves to joke about the music, since Hervé was an excellent musician. On the other hand, he was a very bad philosopher. I know how furious he'd be to read this; I know how angry he'd be to know that's what I think of him; I know he'd call me a stupid sow, an illiterate little bitch. The betrayal is there, in the opening lines of these pages, which were meant to sound casually conversational: I am the traitor. And strangely enough, I know Hervé is also a traitor. But in spite of his betrayals, his silences, and his

disappearances, I know he loved me. I love him still. I love him madly with my chatter, just as I loved him from beyond the pointless, sulky silence I kept for the past few years.

I felt Hervé's curse from the moment he dropped out of sight. I know he cursed me for never having answered his goodbye letter. I know he cursed me for leaving him alone with his rage, but what do you expect? For me to turn myself into a Heideggerian? I know you hated me for not living up to your standards and even more for rejecting the pure German mountain air that makes my head spin. I know that you forgot about me, wishing me the worst and hoping I would die. But ever since we crossed paths in Paris at the theatre where Fassbinder's film, *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, was playing and we didn't utter a word to each other after several years of silence, I've known that you were there for me. You knew I played one of the principal roles in the movie, a role that you never wanted to see me play again. At *Petra*, we could have become friends again, but during that chance meeting – between you, who never went out, and me, who lived 5,000 kilometres from the Cinéma des Halles (and, as you believed, from the rest of the civilized world) – everything was said: "One day we'll be able to tell each other how much we loved each other despite the tragic, misguided power of our mutual hatred and the searing passion of our reciprocal anger."

Your malediction struck me full in the face, Hervé. I had much more than just seven years of bad luck. You certainly had good reason to curse me, and I know that you're still cursing me from beyond the grave. I know you're capable of it; that's for sure. Bad luck befalls me on a daily basis. You can rest in peace, joyfully contemplating the spectacle of my misfortune. I am also sure that you would have been absolutely thrilled with the look I gave Flora when she told me you were dead. You always loved to see me speechless, haggard, and

completely at a loss, the closest I ever got to 'being'. I prefer, however, to hold on to your kindness and your love. It's your love that I take note of here. What you don't know is that my life was also written with the words you had given me, in the dreams where you had brought me to life. And when I did find happiness, I wanted to write to *you* about it. It was just as you had predicted. You wouldn't like Olga, you would hate the dog, you would swear at the cat. You would condemn my stupidity, my beliefs, my excitations, my passion, my sweetness and my cruelty. I wanted to call you and tell you everything, to add something to your long list of recriminations, of accusations, and especially of truths, but I was waiting for the right moment. Now it seems that you have died. You told me that one day you'd be old. Perhaps you did grow old the way your illness makes you old, the way Hervé Guibert described it just before his death. Did you ever read Hervé Guibert? Did you know that I've been studying him for years? Of course I was doing it for you, you know, even though I had no idea you had AIDS. In spite of your being dead, I'm choosing this as the right moment for our reunion. Time wrote our separation scene, but I defy time and history and speak to you here and now. We can only communicate with the dead, with Mahler, or with those who have fallen silent. I hope that while you were alive, I was one of the dead you sometimes spoke to. I hope I answered you and that I made and broke promises to meet you at some Parisian movie theatre. Telepathic communication between the dead, which is what we were to each other.

I accept the burden of your curse, Hervé. I am turning it into sobs, I am turning it into the tears you never ceased to shed for me through your excommunications and your silent violence. I will lay it down like a bouquet of flowers on your grave.

"Do you want me to take you home, Catherine? I'm leaving." Flora spoke suddenly, locking her eyes on mine as if trying to connect with something approximating sanity. "No, that's very nice of you, but I'm going to walk. . . What was Hervé doing? What was his new job?" "He was in advertising. You didn't know?" No, I wasn't aware that a little retraining could turn serious Heideggerians into ad execs. Was Hervé laughing at his lost purity? Was he thinking about me and my futility when he agreed to do that kind of work? I don't doubt it one bit.

Flora has left, and I find myself back in the middle of this party at Bob's where all the guests unwittingly avoid the wing chair where I pitch and toss, where I capsize and sink, where I will end up drowning myself. I would like to get up, mainly to call Olga and tell her about Hervé's death. Talk to Olga, who's at home with her pets, who would take me in her arms. Olga, to whom I bring nothing but a pile of deaths, willy-nilly. By the cartload.

Everyone at Bob's speaks English, and all of a sudden I can't remember the word for "*téléphone*". I try it in French and they seem to understand. I have another death to announce, another dead body to bury. I've become the burial ground for all the friends we've lost. Better be careful and stop all this dying, or I'll have to post the 'NO VACANCY' sign soon.

Olga's voice embraces me, understands me, waits for me. Olga's voice, which will wipe away my tears. And here I am, holding Bob, this giant of a man, in my arms. I suffocate him with the strength of all my dead Hervés, and awkwardly clutching at his jacket, I scream in his ear, "Take good care of yourself!" Bob has seen all his friends die, so he knows that when I hug someone to the point of strangulation, it's because Hervé has died. I look around for my bag but can't find it. I make up my mind anyway and suddenly take off, cruising

maniacally down the highway of grief at a hundred and sixty kilometres an hour, driving wildly with the wind in my hair and other people's deaths in my soul. I peel out with tires screeching, lighter for the loss of a friend, heavier for the burden of one more death. "I am a cemetery even the moon is loathe to visit."

In the street, I want to sing at the top of my lungs, I want to screech my tires, I want to wail, to howl your name: Hervé! You often told me how true my voice was, but also how little this precision meant because, according to you, I had an awful voice. And it's true, I don't have the voice it would take to shatter the world when I cry out your name.

It's still sunny, and the sweetness of June violently rocks the road that flashes by, full speed ahead. June: the month of the dead. I might just as well say the same thing about July, August, December, April and all the rest of the months. Why not set aside whole years as death years? Every day, I drive over the still-warm bodies of my dead friends. Me, I crush everything in my path. I floor the gas-pedal of life. Maximum acceleration.

Five years ago, on the way from Québec City to Baie-Saint-Paul, a taxi driver – a totally demented guy – confided to Olga and me that the highway we were merrily driving along at almost two hundred kilometres per hour had earned the nickname "Highway of Death". The guy had already buried nineteen of his friends, twelve of whom had died on this very road. For someone around thirty, having so many deaths in his life is a real accomplishment, and I asked myself if he was the one who should write a book about the dead. I'm resigned to it, I make no claims... There will always be someone more competent or more talented in this field than I am. Death, unfortunately, is not a private domain.

While the driver took us at breakneck speed on a pilgrimage to all the intersections

where his friends had lost their lives, I was making the connection between death and calculations, I was thinking about the extent to which we now handle death in a mathematical fashion. . . Insurance companies know something about this. Canada is the country with the best-insured population in the world. Protected against everything: theft, fire, life, death, illness, and poverty. Against everything – which changes nothing. Québec has one of the highest suicide rates in the world and its citizens buy the most deodorant per capita. Should we be making something of this, is there some conclusion to be drawn, some logic to be found? Statistics. . . they say that they speak for themselves and I believe it. Mathematics and death: these two entities maintain a strict correlation and I do not think, as Heidegger does, that bureaucracy or better yet, accounting, masks the connection between human existence and death. To the contrary. . . Statistics are a kind of tragic fate. In my opinion, they embody what is left of a destiny that has become common to us all.

Below my windows, a young girl of twenty gets herself killed by a seventy-nine-year-old driver. She had just finished school and had found a job as an actuary for an insurance company, which had only recently entrusted her with the accidental deaths file. She had thus been working on the statistics of her own death. Who says numbers have nothing to tell us?

The taxi driver informed us how lucky he was not to have died in the accident where his brother died instead of him. But he hardly mentioned his brother's death, so happy was he to tell us of his own survival, to be here to tell us such nonsense. The stupidity of those who live on. The stupidity of the statement I make through this book. Survival, as if that were the only thing that counted. The driver laughs at being alive, and while Olga isn't doing well at all because she can't help thinking about her grandparents who live along this Highway of

Death and are obliged to drive it every day, I think about Ann Frank. The one who did not survive, the one who did not return from death. Plenty of people in the camps escaped the gas chambers only to die from exhaustion, starvation, sickness, sorrow, and horror. . . Dead because they could not be survivors. Dead because they could not survive all that. We must not forget: there is more to death than what we see in theatres, there is more to death than what is shown in Spielberg's movies, there is more to death than what they set to classical music. Most striking is death for no reason at all. In the film, *Ann Frank Remembered*, Ann's childhood friend gives the impression that perhaps the little girl could have survived had she known her father was still alive. But because she believed her whole family was dead, she didn't struggle. Who are we outliving and why? For what? And for how long?

I will never know why Ann Frank could not survive, but I know that all who admire the *doyenne des Français*, finally dead at 122, paralyze me with horror. There is something terrifying about a cult whose members have won the game of death. "How lovely that the old bird survived it all: the death of her parents, her friends, her brothers, her sisters, her children, her grandchildren, and her great-grandchildren! How wonderful to have buried all these people and still want to live on? Wouldn't we have just loved to help her bury one or two more generations! What hope for humanity. . ." And throughout all this, my Hervés die in total silence, the silence of friends already dead.

* * *

Five years ago today Hervé died, blown to bits in a terrorist attack in the London subway. Nothing was left of his body, nothing at all, since the bomb had been placed directly under the seat where he had supposedly been sitting. At least that's the official story. Hervé

was definitely on the subway at 5:45 that October 31, 1991. At home, we celebrate Halloween, we dress up as ghosts and skeletons. But in London, Hervé, who had spent years in North America, had undoubtedly taken the subway to go home after having spent the day at the British Library.

Hervé certainly had plenty of ideas in his head, particularly his plan to come visit me the following week because I always found November to be such an awful month with all the deaths and because Hervé wanted, as he always did, to lift my spirits. "Take care!" he repeated to me over the phone the last time he looked after me. Hervé really did die with little pieces of him strewn about the subterranean tunnels of the London tube. An attack by the terrorist group that was the subject of Hervé's thesis and which subsequently issued an embarrassed press release. The irony of fate or the logic of destiny?

No grave at which to gather, no cemetery to haunt on the anniversary of his death, no flowers to buy. I go inside myself to adorn his memory with blossoms. Because I'm the one who has, in all likelihood, become the final resting place for this departed friend.

* * *

I am a date machine. I am a mechanism recording numbers and figures. I am the perforator punching out the days. I am a highly perfected German device or more likely, a computer that incessantly answers the call of the past. Not a day goes by that isn't the commemoration of another. . . I know the dates of the births and deaths of an incalculable number of people. And if by chance a date fails to remind me of something, I know it's because that day is reserved for a new catastrophe. The days themselves are also haunted, full of ghosts and werewolves. They're loaded with the past. There's nothing we can do about

it.

But my memory mechanism is even more complex: I also remember the oldest and most useless telephone numbers. I find this aspect of my brain fairly incomprehensible, although it serves as one more way for me to be inhabited by the past: I often remember the number of someone I had banished from memory many years ago.

Hervé was born on June 16, 1949: he died on June 18, 1989. He had just celebrated his fortieth birthday in the hospital and I imagine his room flooded with light and an abundance of plants, giant flowers, the luscious pornographic flowers that he would have received. Hervé had once dreamed of dying in the early morning, killed by a one-night-stand in a "tourist room". I see him dead on the morning of the 18th after having spent a sweaty night with a man who had slipped into his bed and smothered him with embraces. Hervé died for lack of air. That much is certain. And the killer even has a Latin name: *Pneumocystis carinii*. A talisman-name, a fetish-name that Hervé had written with the pride you take in saying a new lover's name. Thus *Pneumocystis carinii* killed Hervé in the early morning hours, in the room full of flowers and awash in sunlight.

He wrote to me on June 14th, two days before his fortieth birthday, four days before his death: "I don't think I told you I have AIDS. Oh yeah! It attacks the lungs, this *Pneumocystis carinii*." Actually, I don't think Hervé spoke to me about his illness, even if his voice, over the phone on June 12th, sang a familiar tune, the song of someone who couldn't breathe anymore, the song of the beautiful swan that Hervé was in my eyes. I don't believe we ever said the word "AIDS" during our conversations, and I certainly find it hard to believe that Hervé didn't remember our mutual silence. But how are confessions made? Whether we

like it or not, homosexuality is a question of confession. Say it. Don't say it. Understand. Let it be understood. Let it be heard. Do you hear me? Say nothing. Know it without words. Cult of the dead, the AIDS-stricken, and the homosexuals. Cult of the confession, to be made over and over again. Always wear your badge. And this is not enough, you must always explain why, how, with whom, the first trauma and the last lover.

When Hervé got in touch with me the first time, following a favorable review that I had given one of his productions, the editorial staff of the magazine I was then working for decided it would be a good idea *not* to slip his thank-you note into my cubbyhole. After all, Hervé was so famous that he didn't have to thank a mediocre creature like me, a human aggravation. Furthermore, several months earlier Hervé had insulted the magazine's editors over a text they'd promised to write, which of course they hadn't yet had time to draft. In the letter Hervé sent me, the one my editors mislaid, he maligned them, sang my praises, and finished by practically raising me to the status of goddess, me – the one who dared "to stand up to that gang of incompetents rotting away in our institutions." Some four months after the day it was mailed, I received Hervé's letter with an explanatory note from my superior, Jean-François, who apologized for having inadvertently opened my mail and leaving it unnoticed on his desk for all this time. . . Jean-François delicately added that this series of events was unimportant since the letter's sender hadn't requested anything specific.

When I got Jean-François' note and Hervé's letter, I immediately understood that Hervé was sick and that the newsroom staff was hoping he'd croak sometime in the very near future because they wanted to attribute the unkind remarks he had made about our newspaper in a big American daily to his illness and his bitterness. But since Hervé didn't die quickly

enough and because he had, as I later learned, left messages for me at the newspaper that I never answered because I never got them, Jean-François decided to give me Hervé's letter – the one Jean-François could not part with, the one he hounded me about, trying to convince me that answering my mail was pointless. Why had Jean-François let my article on Hervé go through? I don't know. Maybe he thought he could square things with one of the most well-known producers of our era. Maybe he was just perverse. Maybe he was a shit-disturber, waiting to see what would come of all this. I don't know. But Hervé was not the type to forget things quickly.

In spite of Jean-François – or thanks to him – I took pleasure in answering Hervé's letter, in which he told me, a perfect stranger, that he was giving up stage production to devote himself to writing. Fatigue and lack of time to complete his projects, the transient nature of his work, all this was leading him to leave the theatre. . . When I heard this news, I knew right away that Hervé was telling me about his legacy and that one day, I would play the part of executor of his will. Why did I immediately understand? Why had he picked *me*? Because of my words, the adjectives that I used in my article to describe what must have been his last production, because of the words and more importantly, the silences that permeated my review. Because of the way I sound, because of who I am. I don't know.

And thus Hervé revealed his illness to me for the first time. I therefore answered Hervé, carefully weighing each word so that he would know that I knew but would never speak of this knowledge until he stopped his game of innuendo. I made sure he had my telephone number and waited for a few days to hear from him.

On the telephone, Hervé was burning with the desire to talk. With each sentence, he

tried to explain it all to me, every word pulsed with his entire past and with all his hopes for the future. We talked for hours, and I was only too happy to discover someone in this world who was more frantic and more nervously worried than I. It was the gasping voice that I recognized when Hervé called me on June 12, 1989, 6 days before his death, 4 days before his birthday, 2 days before he wrote me the letter in which he spoke to me reluctantly, I am sure, of *Pneumocystis carinii*. But the gasping for air, the hiccupping and wheezing, had become unbearable to hear. Hervé could hardly breathe, but with each weak exhalation, I felt the fever of his life which could no longer be expelled. Hervé simply died consumed by his own energy, which the illness no longer allowed him to expend. *Pneumocystis carinii*. That's what it is called.

* * *

Someone stuck a 'For Sale' sign in front of my building. I wondered for several days about who had decided to move out. I found the answer in a dream I had last week. In it, the old lady downstairs is leaving. She turns the place over to a guy with AIDS and *Kaposi* all over his face. He insists that I make a long visit to the apartment. Before then, I'd only caught furtive glimpses of it. The apartment smells of decay, but I pretend to like it in order to give heart to this new friend, who asks me if I will be there for him when he really needs me. I say "Yes", even though I am appalled. I go back home, just upstairs, and I have the terrible feeling that I'm walking on a grave. Not a French grave but one like at home, blanketed by grass or snow. Those squishy lawn-covered graves we sink into when there has been too much rain. I walk on my neighbour's grave. It is horrendous. I only hope it doesn't open up to swallow me. . . I wake up in a panic.

The most incredible part of this story is that during the week following the dream, I found out that my downstairs neighbour, whom I do not know, really is suffering from AIDS. And as one weird thing leads to another, Fabrice, an HIV-positive acquaintance, passed by my building, saw the 'For Sale' sign, and asked me to inquire about the vacancy. "I'd love to live downstairs from you," he tells me. How does he know I dreamed about him living below me in that cursed apartment? I still didn't actually know which of the three apartments would be available. I hastily tried to make Fabrice change his mind. I had the vague feeling that maybe I should be the one to move. But I have to stay: this I know.

Dreams overlap, recur, and become more intertwined: tonight Olga and I are in a large room at a Paris airport. Lying one on top of the other on the floor are dozens of sick men. With AIDS. Of course. All very frail, all dressed in black. Washed-out black. Olga and I must prepare them to get on the plane. I am taking them home with me where I can take good care of them. They are so slow, their movements so brittle, so unsteady that we are going to miss the plane – the only one – the one that will take us home. Must I leave them there, all these ailing friends, and think about myself and my own homecoming? Must I abandon them so that they will take flight toward their own skies, as one of them seems to be suggesting? All of a sudden, I decide not to take them with me, to leave them behind. I will not take the route they opened for me. I will not travel with them. Not yet. I wake up in tears.

Despite my desire to leave them all in the lurch, I do not completely give up on my AIDS sufferers. I go back to writing about Hervé, come what may. But this gives me no relief. I become, to the contrary, more and more despondent, possessively jealous of my dead friends.

* * *

I had no idea what sort of physical type to expect when we decided to meet at a café in the east end of the city. Although Hervé had been on every television channel both here and abroad, a strange coincidence had kept me from ever seeing him. But I couldn't admit this to him on the phone, so that when he said, "Anyway, you'll recognize me – see you at the café in an hour", I simply said, "Yes." I hurriedly called my friend Isabelle, who had taken theatre courses with Hervé, for a description of him. Since she could only tell me the colour of his eyes and hair and how tall he was, I ended up nervously and foolishly smiling at every tall man with brownish hair who came in the door.

Hervé had arranged for us to meet in a café for boys – for homosexuals, that is – so when I felt a hand on my shoulder, I knew that Hervé was no clairvoyant: I was the only girl there. I hadn't noticed the fact yet, since I'd been so busy craning my neck to catch a glimpse of all the tall brown-haired men standing a head above the rest. Hervé was certainly tall and had brown eyes and brown hair, but what was remarkable about his appearance was the toughness of his black leather clothing. Hervé was a tough among toughs, unlike what the onrush of his nervous voice had led me to imagine. Yet there was something vague, exaggerated, about the hand on my shoulder. Hervé was far too full of himself, and he contaminated me with his excesses. The café was soon filled with his presence, his conversation, his gaze. The space, the walls, could not contain him: the whole world seemed too narrow for him, and there he was, tacitly obliging me to help him gain a bit of control over life's madness, just enough so that he could write a book and make his own death bearable.

In me, Hervé had found his double, one with the same twitches, the same erratic disintegration of his person which he scarcely managed to control from within the stiffness of his black leather, and it was this twin whose hand he asked to hold to help him find within himself a tangible place from which to depart. "For me, dying always meant bursting forth aboard a missile launched at full speed into the emptiness of space, and I don't want this anymore, you know what I mean?" Yes, to find the right metaphor for his death: this is what Hervé was asking of me in that café for gay boys, that Tuesday afternoon when we saw each other for the first and last time. He was hoping I'd help him write the perfect metaphor for death, the one that would tell the truth and ease the wounds inflicted on our flesh by the speed of life. The perfect metaphor that the theatre could not provide and only writing could deliver. Writing. . . and me. Me, the road to death. Me, executor of his posthumous books and literary critic of his works, memory of the written and the spoken word. Me, Catherine, who would have the courage to tell him the value of his work and who will keep him alive after he's gone. Me, Catherine; me, literature incarnate. . .

I was completely disarmed by the scope of Hervé's request. I didn't know how to help him appropriate his own death nor how to get him to say the words that would accompany him on his journey into the infinite, the void. When I saw his stage productions, I was struck by what they had to teach me about the theatricality of the corpse, the artifice and the pathetic pomp surrounding our cadavers. We laugh all the way through Hervé's plays, but it's a stupefying laugh that can, at any moment, leave us frozen and overwhelmed with horror. The horror of our own death.

It came as a total surprise that Hervé had so subtly revealed to me the news that he

would soon die and that he spoke to me about my ability to help him "pass through the mirror to the other side" (because that was the metaphor he used as he scrutinized me with his big, questioning brown eyes, on the lookout, searching for my approval). The way he had of holding my gaze, believing in me, forced me into to resisting him. It was as if I were outside myself, out of sync, and afterwards, I had a hard time recalling the marks the illness had left on Hervé's face because all I remembered about that afternoon was the way Hervé looked into my face. How his huge eyes sought hints about his death in my eyes. Not the death you could see in the hollowness of his eye sockets nor the one that plastered the skin of his face to the bone underneath, but the one that, with my literary severity, I would assign him to accomplish through writing – the death that was buried within me, the death I didn't yet know.

For over a year, Hervé called me once a week to get a detailed report on what I had read of his great book on death. He had also asked me to gather up his old texts and help revise them. These scattered books were published after his death, as I had promised him they would be. He reworked his texts in his hospital room, confidently following all the advice I had given him, but his great book on death went unfinished. Hervé never managed to complete it. "I hope to have at least this one last summer to sit and write on the terrace of my new apartment. We'll see. I don't know if we'll have as much time as Proust did," wrote Hervé from Hôtel-Dieu Hospital on June 14, 1989. The metaphor for death could not take shape the way that Hervé dreamed it would: I wasn't there at the moment of his death to help him find it. He had called me on June 12, his voice between gasps telling me he was going to be in the hospital for a few days for reasons hardly worth mentioning and that I should be

ready to go, full steam ahead, when he got out. He wrote to me on June 14 and told me everything there is to know about *pneumocystis carinii*, but I only got the letter on the 19th (I had moved on June 1 but hadn't found the time to tell him; my mail was forwarded to the new address). So I got the letter on June 19 – the day after Hervé died. A letter from beyond the grave, a letter I keep with me wherever I go because the dead continue to speak to me and send me thoughts scented with perfume from the heavens, thoughts pregnant with the smell of the pyres of Hell.

In his letter, Hervé begs me to visit him in the hospital, although he had refused to see me after our first encounter so that my last memory of him would not be too frightful. Instead, he invited me to come visit him on "the other side of the mirror", and it's only with his permission that I describe him here, after his death.

However, I did not see Hervé in the hospital, but rather at the funeral home to which Hervé's longtime friend, Hervé, had allowed me to accompany him. Besides, it was Hervé, Hervé's one true love, who told me at 11 o'clock on the morning of June 18 that Hervé had died. Since the 12th, the day of Hervé's phone call, I had endured several ghastly days, filled as they had been with dreams about his death. On June 17, after several days spent avoiding the issue, I wrote him a letter saying that I could no longer tolerate either his silence or mine, that I had to see him either at home or at the hospital, and that we absolutely had to see each other again. On June 18, I called Hervé, with whom I'd chanced to speak on the phone several times. I asked him straight out if Hervé was there or in the hospital because I had a letter to give him. I was furious with Hervé, and my disjointed words spilled out rapid-fire. Hervé, who normally used the effusive language to which his lover had finally accustomed

him, answered, "Catherine, Hervé died early this morning, six hours ago. I'm here to make the phone calls and funeral arrangements. Can you hold on? They're on the other line."

I waited a long time on the phone, stunned by the suddenness of Hervé's death, even though we'd been constantly preparing for this event during the entire year we'd known each other. Was Hervé as astonished as I was by his own death? Did it take *him* by surprise? Just then Hervé came back on the line, heard me sobbing, and apologized for his indelicacy. "I should have prepared you for this. I was really inconsiderate."

Hervé was so busy organizing everything that had to do with the funeral that he managed to forget his pain. He read me his list of things to do, including all the phone calls he had to make and the need to attend Hervé's cremation, which was scheduled for that very afternoon at five. Hervé had asked to be cremated as soon after his death as possible – no mourners, no speeches – but the funeral home insisted that someone be there to attest to the fact that the cremation had proceeded without incident. "A real memorial will be held in a few days," he added. "Will you come?" I don't know what came over me at that moment, but for some unknown reason, I begged Hervé, whom I did not know, to let me accompany him to the incineration of his lover's body. Hervé's letter asking me to come see him in the hospital had not yet been delivered, but I had certainly gotten Hervé's message, loud and clear, and I needed to see him, even dead. I still hadn't seen a dead person except on T.V., where the sight of a corpse, either real or fake, made me squeeze my eyes shut. Where did I find the courage and the audacity to ask Hervé if I could see Hervé's remains? I don't know, but Hervé, who knew Hervé much better than I did, reassured me in his tender voice and simply said, "Okay."

We agreed to meet in front of the funeral home, where Hervé had to sign a million papers. Pictures of cemeteries, urn-filled vaults, and several other funeral homes lined the walls, all intended to reassure us about the meaning of death. "It's here that everything comes to an end, and as you can see, there is an end": this is the message implied by the photographs of these pitiful monuments, these buildings erected to do all they can to defy death, as if they were trying to snuff it out. Tons of stone assembled less to keep memory alive than to forget and to reassure the living. But can we really be done with those we have known? Is there truly an end for our dead? I expected Hervé's body to provide answers to my questions. I still believed that death was like an epiphany: capable, perhaps, of unveiling the truth.

I believed Hervé's dead body would free me from uncertainty and bring me some peace of mind. But untroubled souls rarely inhabit the bodies of AIDS patients or the bodies of the dead. I had not yet seen the remains of the elderly, for whom death is rumoured to be the liberation we see inscribed in the tranquil poses these old folks take in their coffins. All I had recognized in the corpses I had seen was the torment, the pain, the decomposition that had already begun in these victims of illness or accident. I'm waiting for the death that will convince me that death can be gentle, but at the moment, I'm only familiar with the soundless movement of these tortured bodies, movement transformed into uncarved stone. I know the petrified chaos of the corpse, even though I had been promised serenity and silence.

I began to understand the foolishness of our discussions about death when I saw Hervé dead, dead and ready for cremation. There he was in his coffin, sicker than he'd ever been, struggling harder than ever, twisted into an absurd, mute posture instead of the death-defying pose he would have wanted. Hervé was shrunken up by the nasty trick death had

played on him, Hervé diminished. Everything in him was still ruled by anger, but an anger that was hopelessly devoid of power. And this lack of power is unbearable to me. It represents the craziness I feel in the presence of my dead. An urge to laugh or to scream, because death does not belong to the world of truth, of the possible. Death is nothing but role-playing, and that is why it's so theatrical. Just as it was in the plays Hervé staged.

Hervé's dead body is theatrical, he has taken the pose, but the sudden movement we anticipate will not occur. He is a fake, but a very realistic one. Hervé is gray and Hervé tries to make a joke, he tries unsuccessfully to make Hervé laugh and he, in turn, is petrified, his life becoming stone on the spot. Hervé will not live long after Hervé's death: AIDS will strike him like lightning. Hervé will die quickly, without Hervé there to see him dead. He will die alone, without friends at his side. You don't have to be a prophet to know it. It was enough to see Hervé trying to bend nearer Hervé's remains and to see his paralysis to know that the impulse to live had ceased in him as well. The undertaker's assistant wanted to proceed quickly, so he closed the casket, and it slowly moved out of sight, transported by a mechanism worthy of Hervé's most beautiful theatrical productions. The casket slips away. Hervé and I are left behind, embarrassed by our uselessness. A small curtain closes. Death's modesty. Curtain! Curtain! I feel like applauding. Hervé would have liked that. And had he taken more time staging his cremation instead of writing about it, it could not have been a greater success. . .

* * *

Suicide pursues me. I'm Cary Grant in *North by Northwest*, I run swiftly and well, gracefully, and for the moment, I'm winning. I'm the more agile. By some miracle, I have

escaped my own death. Once, my analyst laconically told me, "You never attempted suicide, because you know you wouldn't fail." It's a fact, I will not and would not fail. My life is written in alternating tenses: future, conditional. In the present: "I am not committing suicide." This I know. I tolerate life, because I know that if necessary, I will not or would not fail in my attempt to end it.

Suicidal thoughts are hereditary, passed from father to daughter. I think they're transmitted in families the same way as the gene for hemophilia. There are secret laws pertaining to suicidal thoughts, of this I am sure.

I have a friend, a total hysteric, who screams and yells at me because she thinks I turn into a coward as soon as I talk about suicide. She believes my ideas on the subject prove that my spirit is weak. On the other hand, as I was writing about suicide today, I had the impression that I was committing an act of courage. In this, I do not fail. I change the time for suicide into the time to write.

A man threw himself out of a window in the apartment building where I used to live. Thunk! A dull, muffled thud. He was a psychoanalyst who worshiped Deleuze and killed himself one month before his idol did, and in the same fashion. A thud in the emptiness: was it science or foresight into Deleuze's death? This psychoanalyst was also a pedophile. I knew it the moment I met him in the elevator. It wasn't a witch-hunt, it was empathy and identification. Something that often occurs in certain places, like the elevators of buildings. . . I am also, I must admit, claustrophobic. He knew I'd guessed and avoided me completely. One of our mutual neighbours had tried hard to get us acquainted, but to no avail.

The psychoanalyst committed suicide early in the morning by hurling himself out the

window, which he always kept open in case he was overcome by the irrepressible urge to kill himself. Like the urge to pee.

That morning, my dog insisted on going out onto the balcony. She went berserk and seemed to be possessed, ravenous, but for what, I didn't know. It was all because nine floors down, my neighbour's body lay, torn apart by the metal fenceposts on which he had impaled himself. My raging dog, put in a frenzy by the scent of blood, might have wanted to go sniff at the body and perhaps to feed on it, but I didn't understand what all the commotion was about. I hurried out with Sud and noticed that down below, policemen and firemen were laying siege to the building. I just thought the dog needed to do her business, and it was only when we came back from our walk that I asked a building employee what had happened. He said simply, "A suicide. . ." A total wreck, I went back upstairs to my apartment and looked down into the garden to see – to see something – or perhaps to see what had happened again. I wanted to fully understand what had gone on. The truth is, I wasn't really sure what it was I wanted to see. First of all, I was expecting to see signs of what had taken place, a theoretical reconstruction of facts and physical causes of something abstract: Death. . . I had forgotten the question of the body, so sure was I that all traces of its presence had been eradicated by emissaries from the realm of the living. Down below, the firemen were laughing and busying themselves around the pool. An orange sheet fluttered gently from a fencepost. A piece of the body tried, with the help of the wind, to sneak out from under the cloth. At that very moment, I realized that the body was still there and that the smell of the corpse had provoked Sud's panicky rage. After a quarter of an hour during which I could not take my eyes off the orange cloth and the dog appeared totally distraught, howling and maniacally shaking herself

all over the balcony as if she were ready to jump down nine stories to join her prey, I saw the firemen come forward and raise the cloth. I was high above them and could see very few details of the body, but I could not bear to watch as they disengaged the corpse from the fencing. I knew they would have to cut the body in two in order to get it off the spikes. I began to watch again only after the body had been put back together on its stretcher, when all you could see of it was the small, gray-haired head. The corpse was taken away. The dog finally calmed down and I occupied my days obsessively and morbidly making a mental list of the building's residents in order to figure out who had committed suicide. As soon as I saw neighbours in the elevator whom I had presumed dead, I started talking to them in an insanely cheerful manner and held the elevator door open until I could emphasize their need to take care of themselves as long as they were alive. . . I madly preached good health. All my neighbours had come back from the dead. The doorman relieved my anxiety when he voluntarily started to talk about the recent events. I would never have asked anybody about it, fearing that I'd be considered abnormal, even though it was obvious the story was driving me crazy. The porter gave me a name, the name of the deceased, but I wasn't immediately certain who he meant. My young neighbour, the friend the psychoanalyst and I had in common, had only mentioned his first name: Hervé. It wasn't until I stepped into the elevator that I actually connected the name of the deceased with the psychoanalyst. The two took one form, that of the cadaver I had had difficulty identifying on the morning of the suicide. Everything fell into place. Words and shapes became tombstones. The ghost of the impaled corpse vanished and my neighbours returned to their place among the living. Moreover, the psychoanalyst's death, which up until then I had interpreted as an act of desperation or

courage, seemed almost insignificant to me. I had never liked the guy and the feeling was mutual, but the obscenity of his corpse, which death had shown me, no longer seemed incongruous. I was only thinking about identifying the corpse, and it was comforting that I'd known the dead man when he was alive because it would have bothered me even more, had it been the body of a stranger. There was something reassuring about having seen the body before its death. Something human that allowed me think of this body in motion and not as it was that morning, buffeted about by the wind that swept up under the orange cloth.

It wasn't until three months later that I realized what this death meant to me. I had a friend, also a psychoanalyst, and I entrusted her with the details of my neighbour's death. She told us that she discussed the subject with one of her colleagues who, upon hearing about this suicide, promptly dissolved into tears. She told our friend that for twenty-two years she'd harbored the terrible secret that my late neighbour had confessed to her while he was a student, and only now she could finally speak of it.

Apparently, my neighbour had been arrested for pedophilia when he was young and had received treatment afterwards. My friend's colleague was sure he'd killed himself out of remorse or self-loathing. But on the same day I heard this story, my young neighbour also shared confidences with me, and I learned that the psychoanalyst had committed suicide because a young boy had refused his advances, that his suicide had merely been an act of passion, and that regret had been the furthest thing from his mind. Thus the official explanation of his death was, for those who had known him, that he had been driven by the remorse and shame that they believed all pedophiles must feel. Everyone, especially his neighbours in the building, judged this version of the facts to be moral, and they took on a

certain smug expression whenever they talked about it. I noticed that my neighbour had spoken to everyone about the dead man's "illness" and that people imagined he had died in peace, having eased his soul by paying for his misdeeds with his life.

If my neighbour hated me, it wasn't because I knew but because he hadn't been the one to tell me. He could not have admitted to regret. In our psychoanalytic society, where we're promised that talking will free us of the chains that are our problems, we confess for perverse or purely manipulative reasons. "Our repentance is halfhearted and we exact hefty payment for our confessions," wrote Baudelaire, fully aware of what was at stake.

My neighbour killed himself while suffering the torments of an uncontrollable passion, to hurt someone, not to rid the planet of 'the scumbag', the role he took pleasure in playing for the sad eyes of the universe. But this form of atonement satisfied everyone but me. "The poor man," they murmured in conspiratorial tones. As for me, I could think of nothing but the rage that had motivated this act, rage over not managing to possess what he wanted. Rage and especially the emotional blackmail that was made patently clear in the farewell letter he'd left for the young man he had wanted as captive and lover. This suicide meant something to me. It taught me not to attribute noble motives to such an act, that we are often mistaken when it comes to suicide, and that the peace the soul attains through death is often just one more farce played out by the one who kills himself – and it may not even be the last. . .

I learned not to feel compassion for every suicide victim, compassion I'd felt more or less obliged to feel because of my grandfather's suicide several years ago. The old man took his own life just to piss us off, to keep us from getting his life insurance money (which he had always promised would go to my mother), and in fact, his death was purely accidental. Once

again, he was thinking of turning his body into the theatre of his so-called unhappiness. My grandfather had made hundreds of suicide attempts, each one more dramatic than the rest, but the last time he tried, he botched the scheduled performance by miscalculating the amount of medication he should take and that was that. No life insurance and a will that left everything to others.

The neighbour who killed himself offered me the opportunity to free myself completely from my grandfather's death, and later, when one of my PhD students, a depressed, Bergmanesque Swede, threatened to commit suicide, I coldly told him, "Fine, as long as you don't do it in my office," to which I had loaned him the key.

Suicide seems neither cowardly nor brave. It often fits the pattern of your entire life. In my grandfather's case, suicide was just one more failure and one more dirty trick.

What parallels can be drawn between my AIDS-victims and my suicides? Why am I filled with affection for the first group and total indifference for the second? I don't know.

Still, I could just as easily end up dying by my own hand as I could dying of AIDS. At least that's what I believe. At least that's how I have come to accept my life, my love and my hatred of others.

One of my Hervés put a bullet in his brain when he found out how far his illness had progressed, and even Hervé Guibert finished himself off before he could be taken by the horrible death that was taking only tiny insidious steps towards him. If only my grandfather had died of AIDS, I might have cried over him for a long time. . . Unfortunately for him, ever since his wife's death, he only slept with my cousins and sisters – granddaughters all and all too young to have been initiated into the world of sex and drugs . . . At least that's what my

sister, utterly terrified of my grandfather's powerful ghost, confided to me on the day my neighbour killed himself. Hélène's confession coincided with the time of my neighbour's defenestration, and for me, this was the beginning of a profound reflection on the despicable personalities of certain people who kill themselves and more generally, on the abject nature of the hereafter.

If my filthy pig of a grandfather continues, from beyond the grave, to scare the little girl whom my sister has remained because of him, I can only hope that he is terrorized by my contempt, my hatred, and my vengeance. . . From time to time, I go spit on his grave, because I don't believe that, even dead, he is clever enough to read my mind. But profanities and insults, he does understand, this ever-so-respectful and upstanding man who lost his wife young and never remarried so as to preserve the memory of my grandmother.

I was the only one of the granddaughters to escape my grandfather's libido. It's almost insulting. I bear the name of my grandmother, his wife. Maybe not touching me was his way of respecting her.

Neither ghosts nor incest frighten me – let the bastard get that into his thick skull.

* * *

My friend, Hervé, who just lost someone dear to him, found himself alone at home one evening when, all of a sudden, he felt the distinct presence of the friend he had buried just a few days earlier. Hervé begged his dead friend to go away, explaining that he wasn't ready for an apparition since, in his current mental state, he could not withstand the shock, and that this otherworldly display would keep him from mourning. He pleaded his case so brilliantly that the phantom was persuaded to go haunt someone more psychologically prepared for the

experience. Because of this, Hervé was, for a long time, convinced that he had power over the dead, which made him something of a megalomaniac. For a long time, he believed he controlled death. That was before AIDS carried him off at the age of 25.

For some of those among the living, including me, the dividing line between the world of the living and the world of the dead sometimes seems so blurry that I feel like one of the living dead. It's not just that I'm obsessed with death, it's more that I've begun to think like the dead and to understand why some of them are angry. To look at my world from their point of view. And even though you might think this world would lend me a certain detachment from life and earthly possessions, I have more of a feeling that I embody, embed myself into, the opacity of things. Without the dead, I'd be ethereal. But because the dead must often deal with language and the world of the living in order to speak with us, I am on the lookout for their presence in the harshness and asperity of all things. Maybe this is what they call the memory of objects, history, or being. It's my rendezvous with death that keeps me clinging to life.

In the elevator of my building, I confront time and its madness – time and its supreme madness. Each time the door opens, I meet a neighbour I last saw either one night ago or six months ago. I am tied to the arbitrary dictatorship of encounters. I use the elevator to measure the absurdity of time but cannot determine its true logic. There remains an uncertainty, an absurdity, in the form of questions and near-certainties: "Here's the couple I haven't seen for such a long time. My, how they've changed, those two! Is she still letting him beat her? Rusty's hair has really grown. . . Was she away for the winter? When was the last time I saw her? That gray-faced man is getting sicker and sicker, AIDS is taking his eyesight,

and to think that not so long ago. . ."

And then there are the encounters I'll never forget. The very young man who started crying at the sight of my dog, because the night before, he had had to get rid of his golden retriever. He wasn't strong enough to walk him anymore. His illness – AIDS, of course – precluded this. Well-meaning friends had advised him not to keep the dog, because they knew his death was imminent, they knew how quickly things happen. He also knew, but he would have liked to stretch life out and to protect the joy of wrapping himself around his dog's body, still so warm and full of life, from the passage of time. Sud's smell and her fur had reminded him of this separation. Physical death would only be the logical, almost casual step to follow this first act of self-abdication. I hadn't seen this young man for quite some time when a few months later, his picture appeared on the obituary page. This is how I learned that his name was Hervé. A funeral service was to be held the next day at the nearby church. Mourners were invited to come without further invitation. The day of the burial, I had neither the desire nor the courage to attend the ceremony. But the church bells pealed for a long time, and my dog paid them tribute by barking loudly.

Some encounters, sometimes the more sordid ones, smash the order of time into a thousand scattered pieces. For years, I met up with a fairly old man almost every morning. He was taciturn and churlish and grudgingly walked a little dog, who was as temperamental as a child. Finally, after some time, I brought him out of his shell, and he managed to say hello to me. On the other hand, I never won the favors of his tiny pet, who growled with equal ferocity at Sud and me. On Saturdays and Sundays, this man was accompanied by his friend, a man of the same age, the dog's actual owner. It was through him, a man who didn't shy

away from social contact, that I learned that the little dog hated females of his kind, and the last time he'd had the occasion to smell the hind quarters of a bitch in heat, he'd been sick for three days and had even vomited. I understood that the man was trying to tell me something about his homosexuality, but neurosis is nothing new to me, and I was left feeling quite indifferent.

One day, it was very cold, and the father of the dog in question was out walking with his pet under his arm and came into the building, boisterously announcing that he was going to heat up a nice little meal for Oscar. His friend, more uncommunicative than ever, was in front of him, holding the door open to make way for the little dog. All of this man's sullenness sprang from his friend's love for Oscar and his own daily obligation to walk a dog whom he would have gladly sent sliding down the garbage chute. Soon, I no longer saw the taciturn man out with the dog. Oscar's daddy walked the dog by himself, and the dog was clearly growing fatter. He never left his master's arms except to make a quick pee. I thought the taciturn man had won: surely he had explained to his friend that Oscar was not his pet and if he wanted to spoil the mutt, that was his choice, but he'd have to do it alone. Moreover, the dog's father was transforming himself from day to day. He changed his hair style, took care how he dressed, and was even more cheerful than normal. "There's nothing like getting out of a slump," I said to myself, "It'd be good for anyone."

Several months later, Olga and I were in the elevator with the little dog and his owner, and after the standard "hello-how-are-yous", the man said almost triumphantly, "You know my friend, the one you used to see me with in here? He's been deceased for three months."

I hate it when people use the word 'deceased'. Euphemisms get on my nerves and I

have trouble understanding that someone has died when this past participle is slipped into a conversation. Nevertheless, I immediately started to cry, wailing and insulting the people around me. I found it unbearable that the taciturn man was not in the elevator, where he would have been had he not died, and it seemed so sad. And soon enough, that infernal dog growled at me. He could not fathom why someone would cry over the man who had walked him for all those years. When he saw my tears, the little dog's owner said, "But these things happen. He had lung cancer – it's better this way, have a nice day." The elevator door opened. Yes, of course people die, but when you live with someone for seventeen years (information confirmed by the doorman), the least you can do is to treat him like a dog.

* * *

Sud is sick. I write these words to ease the panic I feel when she's ill. She threw up all night and her body turned into a huge vomit pump. The whole house is marked by her regurgitations, whose trail I follow and which I loyally attend. I clean up, even when I'd rather be doing something else. I pretend to remain among humans, sane people. I clean even when I imagine myself rolling around in all this vomit, decorating myself with it, taking part in the illness. I rub my dog's belly, but she's not feeling well enough to accept my caresses. She makes repeated tours of the house in search of her normal self. She's doing poorly. The night passes with this back-and-forth of life and death – I mean the death that I'm afraid she'll suffer one day. I dread the day she'll die, and contrary to what I think about the deaths of my friends and relatives, I can't even hope that Olga and I will go before she does. Who would take care of her? Reason dictates I should want her to die before I do. Reason demands that I witness her death. . . Sud is a dog, a vulture on death's road, and I hope that she'll be my

seeing-eye dog, a guide for the blind bitch that I am.

In the morning, her stool is full of blood. I become a beast. Sud does not speak and I cannot speak for her. I am incoherent, everything shrieks and howls inside my head. I become a dog, no, a wolf, a captive held in death's trap. As the years go by, my metamorphosis into an animal grows more and more apparent. Sud never became human, but I am an animal. And a brute. I suffer without saying a word.. My dog will have rescued me from madness. I couldn't talk before, and my body gave off signals, trying to articulate what I could not. Now there's nothing but the shit, the blood, the suffering, the corpse, none of which has anything more to say. Meaning has made a quick escape, it's come undone. I hope I die like a dog. And these pages are nothing more than a prosthesis for the meaning that's been excised. One vast comedy, condemned to oblivion, or worse yet, to one very small vanity.

I met an incredibly ugly girl and her absolutely gorgeous dog in the park. James, the dog, is very timid. He jumps at the tiniest noise and wants to go home. Sud adores this animal whom she can dominate and who makes her look extraordinarily brave. After two years of fun and teasing around in the park, James moves away with his mistress. I happen to see her again at a book launch and I ask for news of James. "I put him to sleep," she answers in her native English. I hear a replay of the 'deceased' scenario. "Why? You had him killed?" I scream into her ear. She switches back to French, afraid that I might hit her: "He was just too cowardly. His quality of life was no good." If we are now at the point of judging the quality of life of living things in order to allow ourselves to do away with them, then we risk eliminating quite a few. I think this girl is ugly, truly ugly, like in one of Jean Leloup's songs.

And that must be damaging to *her* quality of life, which, in all likelihood, is pretty mediocre. I have to see her fairly often, and she runs from me each time. She lives comfortably with her guilt and her shame. But not with the words I hurl in her face.

* * *

My former students sap my morale, they depress me, poison my life and end up destroying me. I am definitely not a good mother. I have no maternal instincts. If I could, I'd banish them all with one single profanity. The other day, I was crossing the street when three students I hadn't seen called out to me. They were probably happy to see me again. Not me. We were in front of the most highly-rated English university in North America, the one attended by rich anglophones and nouveau riche francophones who dream of forgetting where they came from. My former students belong to the second category. I quickly learn that they're doing their doctorates in seventeenth century literature or on a Canadian woman writer who spits on Québec... They study at this university and smile at me in the street, fully convinced that I'm pleased that they too have become literary types. They immerse themselves in my lineage and devour my descendants. They are proud to show me how they've followed in my footsteps and I – I loathe them. I vomit them up. I deny them ... and many more than just three times. I spent so many hours showing them that literature can also be *not* going to this university. I am so tired of telling them to work on something other than Gabrielle Roy and all the right-thinking but totally uncommitted critics that I want nothing more to do with them. I curse them. They keep me there on the street corner so they can tell me what their theses are about and the names of their thesis directors, all academics with whom I want no contact at all. I feel nauseated. It gets me right in the gut. It wracks me

with spasms. My teaching was in vain, and the worst of it is that to a certain extent, they consider themselves my disciples. They ask where I'm teaching and for how much longer, and I tell them I'll do it 'til I die. Off they'll go to repeat this witticism, thinking they know what it means. Let them have their second-rate interpretations. May they all become profs. I wish for them only that at which they already excel: mediocrity at age 23.

Death shelters me from my students. When I run into one of them, all I have to do to cut the insipid conversation short is mention that a friend has died of AIDS. The funereal protects me, it works like a condom. I drape myself with my dead, I wrap myself up in a shroud.

Literature taught my students that you must speak of such things in metaphors, and if you don't use figures of speech with them, they slide about and get completely disconcerted. Death. . . they are so scared of it that they deal with it in advance so as not to have to think about it when it comes.

When a colleague at another university died suddenly, as they say, of a heart attack, just as his department was choosing his replacement for the following year, the year of his retirement, people were somewhat at a loss. It had been a good idea to think about replacing him (even if that had been what killed him), but no one had organized a symposium or a special issue of a journal for him. He had gone too quickly, without receiving a tribute, without one of his former students writing a vapid article about his exceptional qualities as a teacher during the thirties, a time when he was flirting with the extreme right. Since nothing had been prepared, they had to improvise, holding a symposium and putting out a special issue simultaneously. And this with all the brouhaha the university could muster. Since he had

not accomplished much during his lifetime (for which I admired him, in spite of the fact that he'd been childish and nasty for the last ten years), this was no simple matter. The symposium was entitled "The Life and Times of Pierre Rochant" because it would have been difficult to produce something specific about Rochant and his work. There would have been little to say. Since then, they hold conferences for the dead-to-be, three years before their scheduled retirement. This way, they can be buried quickly and in their own presence. This way, we can mourn when no mourning is called for and waste no time celebrating our mediocrity, because later, when a colleague dies, we might not feel like it anymore. Hence death-in-advance gives us a good excuse not to think about death when it does arrive. This is what the university should write into its employment contracts: "A professor is required to delay death until after a colloquium is given in his or her honor."

There are also people who die young, not from AIDS or cancer where you can see death coming step by step, well ahead of time, and for whom you have time to discreetly plan plenty of noble events and petty antics. No, I'm talking about the sudden deaths that abscond with the lives of those who have not yet been prepared by the institution to leave. They're wild about these losses in our universities. Because there's no reason to feel guilty for having done nothing before a colleague's death. There was no way of knowing... Instead of raising questions about the meaning of life, these absurd, unthinkable deaths offer comfort to the oldest professors, who feel that a god has singled them out because they did not perish so young and were left with plenty of time to produce unoriginal work after unoriginal work.

The deaths of young professors are popular at the university. They give the seventy year old geezers the opportunity to come to solemn ceremonies, to teach us a lesson about

the meaning of life – the meaning of their lives, that is – and to quote Seneca on the transience of terrestrial things. There's the opportunity to feel safe, to think that youth passes by too quickly and that it perishes for its sins. There's the opportunity to discuss the immaturity of the defunct young colleague's work and the glorious reputation he or she would have had if only life had gone on a bit longer. It leads them all to believe they have lived this long for the sole purpose of writing three or four utterly useless technical books; it provides a raison d'être for their decrepitude, what they would call their selection by God.

Saddest of all is that my deceased young colleagues have already written books and articles of great importance, a fact not mentioned by the mediocre creatures who perpetuate the idea that the real work is yet to come. The jealousy of these old professors is such that during the eulogy, they talk about fragments of thoughts and 'work in progress'. "If only he had lived..." Annihilate the subsequent generations, consign them to silence and death, erase them from memory, all means are used to embalm the species. They search their young colleague's biography for moments that might have foreshadowed such a unexpected death. In such and such a year, he spoke of this: in such and such a year, he did that: surely he felt death lurking nearby. And those of us who feel nothing, we professors who joyfully collaborate with the institution's depravity, we old fools who cleave to life while binding ourselves to common stupidity as if we never have even the slightest foreknowledge of our own deaths, we will live at least a hundred years pushing our pencils across pathetic pages, writing elegies for the dead thirty year olds we will join as late as possible.

During one of these ceremonies, held in memory of a young woman, a 29 year old professor who died mangled in a car accident, I was able to observe the narrative style of her

older colleagues. There they were, already prepared to recount the shocking death of their former co-worker, barely cold in her grave, and ready to recite whole passages of poems they had learned as high-schoolers. The husband of one of the colleagues told me that when his wife heard the sad news in a phone call received during a trip abroad, she appeared so shattered that for a minute, he thought that their country house had burned down. "Oh no, sir, it was only the death of a 29 year old colleague and I don't understand why your wife had that 'house-just-burned-down' look because, *au contraire*, she had just been given something to keep her busy for the next few months and something to give her a reason to live. And in fact, the woman in question took the floor, saying how much this death had personally affected her. The most awful thing was that she was completely and utterly sincere. For this woman, looking like someone whose house just went up in smoke offers proof of her great pain – what in her narrow little universe could be worse than having lost her house? She repeated this anecdote, with a certain measure of pride, throughout the evening.

Bob was also there that evening, and he cried continuously in order to pay homage to the last one hired by his department, the deceased. He had no more idea what to say than did the others. He too was caught in the trap of telling how he met the deceased, but there was a real touch of helplessness in his voice, whether from a sense of irony or from having conjured up the late woman's body and her physical charms. . . I would like it if my words here were like Bob's, cruel and awkward, but above all, cruel and awkward in my own eyes, towards me. I want words that make me suffer when I speak of my dead, words that set my teeth on edge and cause me pain, and forever and always, words that I perceive as vain, words that I perceive to be treacherous. I refuse to speak words that console or words that

forgive.

Bob read his speech to the end, without blinking, and the next day, he signed his letter of resignation from his position as head of the sociology department. Later, he told me that he had found his work as chairman unbearable. He felt he had been chosen for the sole purpose of hiring this brilliant young intellectual and being there when she died so that something appropriate would be said about her. With that, his task was complete; with that, he finished with this bit of destiny.

Burying the dead, being there as witnesses, paying homage, receiving messages from the great beyond: there are also people who live simply to acquit these duties.

* * *

There are the dead who haunt you and never leave you alone, those who follow your every step and even manage to take your place in daily life, those who cut you out of the action to promote their own existence: they are the phantoms, the parasites and leeches from the great beyond, who demand compensation or better yet, some kind of vengeance. I would put Hamlet's father, for example, into this category. Then there are the dead who remain discreet, who send you messages but not too often, who remain obscure and distant, making you doubt the existence of the hereafter, the better to reassure you a few days later, but never completely. You have to appeal to them, have clairvoyants call them forth, summon them to a round table, make them appear in a dream: you have to find a channel of communication to connect with them. And then the frequency of this two-way channel is full of interference. The dead play hide and seek with me. There they are, the better to disappear and then later, there they are again, but in a different form that I do not understand. Hence my passion for

signs and interpretation. I seek the dead in the innermost recesses of my life and I don't want to spoil the moment when they reveal themselves. I have antennae everywhere.

My grandmother appeared to my father the night before I was born and ever since then, I've had a penchant for the hereafter. My sign is the Ghost, or more precisely, Death. When I was little and we went to Europe, my mother took me to put flowers on the graves of everyone who had died in the past, people I'd never met but to whom I owed so much. As if the family of dead weren't big enough as it was. . . I had to visit the cemeteries where Canadian, British, and American soldiers were buried in Norman soil. Not to mention the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and the Parisian tombs I visited so I could pay homage to Piaf as well as to Musset. I know all the cemeteries in France and Navarre. My mother was so unhappy living in America. It was not the land where *her* dead were buried. I don't know anything about American cemeteries, except for the military kind, particularly the one in Arlington, near Washington. According to my mother, the American soldiers fought for the liberation of France and were therefore part of our family, they were our dead too.

My mother's passion for cemeteries was at the root of my urban and personal geography. For a long time, I lived across from cemeteries without realizing it and even when I went to live in Europe for a few months, I ended up staying near the American cemetery at Suresnes. I easily get my bearings if there's a cemetery nearby. Far from cemeteries, I get a little disoriented. Now I live far from the dead. I find it more practical to carry them around with me. From time to time, I invented the portable dead.

My mother also had a passion for pictures of flower-bedecked graves. Entire albums were dedicated to this genre. This year, Great-Aunt Louise's grave had more flowers than

Great-aunt Suzanne's. The comparative study is well documented. My mother, who hasn't set foot in France in over twenty-five years, fails to fulfil her duties and no longer honours her dead. But she still makes comments about their graves.

When my grandmother unexpectedly died during a visit to her family in Quebec City, her body had to be repatriated to French soil. The family never would have thought to do otherwise. Thus my grandmother went back to France, but in a special coffin designed so that it wouldn't transport any local diseases. Hermetically sealed with lead. My grandmother was buried like an American soldier, on the coast of Normandy, facing the Atlantic Ocean, which still separates us from her, but in a different way.

When my cousin, who enlisted in the French army out of loyalty to his origins even though he'd spent his whole life in Montreal, died in Europe during a military exercise, his family, which had emigrated to Quebec long ago, had his body sent back to 'America', the country which thereby became my own homeland. Homeland, soldiers: they don't mean much to me and yet. . . The first one out of the second generation to go died on French soil and had to be sent back here, to his home. The first to die had to be a soldier and I continue to live here on American soil, decorating soldiers' graves with flowers.

In my family, dead bodies cross the ocean, death is trans-Atlantic, and I can't get on a plane to Paris or Barcelona without a bit of a shiver. Sometimes I think I'll die in mid-flight, in the middle of the ocean, just to avoid having to choose where I'll be buried or I imagine my ashes being scattered across the cold ocean waves from the high deck of a giant steamship like the one my mother took the first time she came to Quebec. It's not our birthplace that counts in life. It's the search for a place to die that drives us to live on.

It seems that because of the continental drift, the Atlantic Ocean is growing wider day by day, month by month, year after year. This geographical fact fills me with fear.

My mother's aunts, my great-aunts, also had a passion for tombs. I suppose I take after them in this respect. From time to time, they would go visit their dead husbands and busy themselves with tidying what would become, sooner or later, their little 'homes'. Having the angels regilded, having the inscriptions recarved, and especially making sure that no other family member would have the audacity to take their place inside the vault: such were their principal tasks. Death's perfect little ladies, my great-aunts, are dead now. They are all properly lined up in the vault, as if they themselves had chosen their places in the family drawer. Since their deaths, the family plots have been a little dirtier and the family a little less impeccable.

Tombs are only found in cemeteries, but apparently the threshold of Gainsbourg's former residence is strewn with flowers. Paris is one immense cemetery, but that's the case in every city, in every town in the world. The world is haunted.

My paternal grandmother is buried facing the Mediterranean, in Muslim soil, but in the Christian section of the cemetery. These are my other dead, not my military or maritime dead, but my southern dead, my hot-ash dead, my dead from a place where life is truly a pleasure. I don't know these dead relatives as well as I know the others. My father's side of the family is more superstitious and doesn't talk about death. That invites the evil eye, as do black cats, black curtains, black things in general. Pointless to mention what colour I wore as an adolescent and pointless to reveal what kind of relationship I had with my father. In my opinion, black is not the colour for mourning, it's more for provocation. Provocative black.

Black provokes misfortune. When I'm in mourning, I don't wear black, thus I mourn *for* black.

Write about the dead because we leave nothing to them, because they leave with nothing from us, even write on their bodies to mark them. Do you talk about me anymore, my dead ones?

* * *

There was Hervé whom I loved and who died of AIDS, again without my knowing or understanding it. Hervé was my hairdresser, even though I couldn't really afford to treat myself to such extravagantly priced haircuts. His clients were, for the most part, chic men and women and the most popular models. Yet every five weeks, I went into this ultra-ritzy salon to have my hair done. Hervé didn't talk to me very much, he did his job conscientiously and I scrutinized his every movement. I tried to get information on him, I listened to what the other hairdressers, the battery of assistants, and the five receptionists had to say about him. They said little. Hervé was discreet, very discreet. One day someone wished him a happy birthday-weekend and I was able to deduce that he'd been born on the first or second of November. All Saints' Day, of course... From then on, I believed we were destined for each other. I was also born on the day of the dead and I imagined that we had a certain sensitivity in common. But the truth? I never knew it.

When I saw Hervé's picture in a women's magazine that was paying him tribute (because he had died), I was overcome by a violent fit of tears. One night, Matt (that little slut of a hairdresser whose clients are all sluts too) had confided to me that Hervé was sick. "He's got something between indigestion and gastroenteritis," the little bitch whispered in my ear

because the music in the bar where we found ourselves forced me into this unpleasant contact. So I had not understood that Hervé was actually at death's door. A week later, I saw Matt at the supermarket and after I asked for news of Hervé, he told me that Hervé wasn't getting any worse but that "we still don't know what it is." Matt switched to English, his mother tongue, to make me believe what he'd said was true. At that very moment, his change of language allowed him to believe he was a good person who kept quiet and did not spread unsavory rumors about his friend Hervé's health. The passage into English and the serious air he assumed gave Matt the impression that he was in on the gods' secret and that he was not betraying Hervé's cause. Matt, that bitch, must have been so proud of the way he kept silent for months about the gravity of Hervé's illness, until such time as he forgot his own glory, because the moron doesn't have enough of a brain to remember his acts of heroism for more than six months. But I definitely remember the slip into English and the expansive attitude he displayed in the supermarket, although I didn't decode them until much later, when after Hervé's death, I tried to understand why and how I had never known about his AIDS. And God knows how much AIDS is a part of me and how I suspect all the healthy people in the world of hiding their illness from me. I see the whole universe in terminal phase, but in this Hervé's case, I saw nothing, nothing before his picture appeared in the May 1993 issue of *Elle Québec*. I had understood nothing. And I can't even blame that little slut Matt. I never knew anything, and on top of it, never understood anything. I so badly wanted to keep Hervé with me, in this life. I admired him so much and in my eyes, he so embodied all possible qualities, all the grace of the living, that I never could have imagined that he was ill. And yet not long after a Christmas Eve dinner, hadn't he broken his habitual silence to tell me as he

cut my hair with his fairylike fingers that he'd been very sick on Christmas night? He had brought a semi-preserve of foie gras to his parents, who lived in London at the time, and after everyone had some, he was the only one of the group to get food poisoning. He took himself off to the hospital and "finished Christmas on my back," as he told me, laughing. "I have a fragile immune system," he added so that I would understand. But I understood nothing, although I recorded his words in the very depths of my being. Now these words echo horrendously within me. How could I have heard them, remembered them, without deciphering them? Was that what the semi-preserve story meant to me? Cryptic words, heard, their real meaning escaping me but saved for later, when powerless, I will be able to hear them. Foie gras will poison me forever.

Thus Hervé had said a lot, but I understood nothing. I was content just to record. I was an automatic answering machine, for him, nothing more than that. He left his voice on the admiration machine that I was, and I only listened to the message once it was too late. The night I read about his death and saw his photograph, Hervé appeared to me in a dream. Some would say more prosaically that I dreamt about him, but I would respond that having dreams about Hervé was not new for me and that that night, he appeared to me, because he was not alive in my dream, but quite dead. He came to say "goodbye" and to apologize for not having done so sooner. It was this delicacy that made me realize right away that it was Hervé's ghost. He took me in his arms, with great strength, and suddenly I was panic-stricken. I asked him, "Who's going to take care of my hair now?" He answered me gently, as was his wont, "But who took care of *my* hair when I died?" And since I had no idea how to answer him, he smiled and said, "It doesn't matter, dead people's hair is unimportant

anyway." And he left.

My hair is less important since Hervé's death. I'm not yet in the world of the dead and this preoccupies my thoughts quite a bit, but it's not the same anymore. I have my hair cut any old place, without preparation or ceremony, as long as it's done quickly and well. And in spite of everything, that bitch Matt, who cuts my cousin's hair, tried hard to become my Hervé. He dared to say that he hoped I would become his client, now that Hervé was no longer around. This bastard saw himself as the inheritor of all the hair that Hervé coiffed. But I will never let him touch my hair. I know he was a friend of Hervé's, but what little he could tell me about Hervé, in English to make it sound true. I could tell without even being told. Matt has nothing interesting to say, that's just how it is. He has nothing inside but a bunch of clichés.

Since then, I go about with my hair a shaggy mess, the hair of a madwoman, the hair of someone half-dead, and when I cross paths with Matt, I pretend not to notice the incensed look he wears when he sees my badly coiffed hair, my multi-coloured roots, and my bleached-out ends. Matt looks upon me with the air of a proprietor whose property, my body, I am slowly but surely demolishing. Hervé should have bequeathed my head to him and one day he'll sue me for damages and interest. Sometimes he hopes I'll die because he thinks it's indecent that I am alive and taking such poor care of his possessions.

He does not understand that I don't follow the example of all the women who became his clients after Hervé died and haven't really noticed the difference.

My hair belongs to Hervé, and since his death, its value on the hair market has doubled. I am not just anybody: I had my hair done by Hervé, and whoever finally takes over

for him can proclaim himself the victor. Hairdressers are fighting to get hold of my hair, and me – I persist in having my hair look worse and worse and change hairdressers after each cut. This is how I remain faithful. A rebel with my hair.

* * *

I was awakened at nine in the morning by the sound of my mother's voice on the answering machine. Her voice was tearful, my half-brother had died during the night. A heart attack while he was sleeping. How do you cry for a brother you hardly knew, a son you haven't seen in over twenty-five years? I openly admit that I am becoming inhuman. This admission is the only evidence left of my humanity. How do you cry for someone you took for dead for so many years? I know my words are cruel, I know the horror they arouse in me. It's cruelty that will kill us, our inhumanity. My half-brother, Patrick, will be buried on the other side of the Atlantic, in Europe. He had always rejected the family's immigration. He'll be buried in his homeland, but not one of his brothers or sisters will go to put flowers on his grave. No one will go to his funeral. He was only a half-brother, a semi-son, half-alive and half-dead to us for such a long time. Europe is too far away; the Atlantic gets bigger every day, time passes from second to second and we here, we forget those who live and die over there, as they forget us. At least I hope they do.

How many will die before the end of this book? How many phones will ring and secret alarms sound? How many times will destiny come calling? And then there's the question about the end of the book, an unexpected conclusion, like the eventual death of its author, which I do not suggest but which is there in each one of my words, in each one of my deaths.

* * *

Hervé also died in his sleep, but he was much younger than my half-brother, even if he was only half a friend. Hervé was a lawyer, already famous at the time of his death at age twenty-three. A young Turk, son of an immensely rich magistrate. But as if a career in law weren't enough to satisfy Hervé's appetite for life, he took courses in Slavic literature with me and demonstrated a most enduring enthusiasm. I really liked this boy, whom I had seen hanging out in the bars a few years earlier, looking a bit like Mick Jagger. When I saw him again in my classes, I told him what he'd been like at sixteen. He seemed astounded that a perfect stranger knew so much about him, when he knew nothing about me and didn't even remember my face. I have a remarkable memory.

I am a big cupboard where the past piles up. Without meaning to, I divest people of their history, which I keep within me. . . This is what Providence has given me and it's not easy to be alone with the past. I'd even call it my curse. After having laughed with me spying on his adolescence, Hervé became a buddy with whom I had long discussions after the seminars, about everything and nothing – Dostoevsky, Raskolnikov, crimes, punishments, and the best hashish in the city.

We weren't friends. Hervé relentlessly fled all such situations. Run for your life! A lawyer, Hervé wanted to be a professor of literature, but when he spoke to me, he constantly looked at his watch so he wouldn't be late getting to the courthouse or to a meeting he couldn't miss.

He thought I was chasing after him and since I liked to watch him run away, I made myself flirt gently with him just to watch him make his very elegant escape. One day when he couldn't take it anymore and had decided to protect himself from an eventual attack, he let

me know that he had a girlfriend. I pretended not to hear or to understand, just for the pleasure of seeing him hightail it out of there, trying to make a quick getaway. I'm sure that sometimes he talks about me with his girlfriend, Christine, or about someone else. Never there. That's where Hervé was. Always somewhere else, with his passion for the in-between in his gut and his love of flight. He died in his sleep at twenty-three, on the ninth of May. I don't know the date of his birth, but I know the date of his death. His parents had a picture of him published in the obituary column, where he's seen holding his law school diploma. Hervé had been found dead in his bed, having died at daybreak. Four of my acquaintances died in their sleep. This is not destiny. Four silent deaths in the night, four who died without warning, it's simply a normal statistic in the life of any forty year old. It's important to make sense of the logic in all this. . .

I relayed the news to a good number of my friends in the literature department and since no one recognized the name of this boy, who was not altogether 'there' and was always in a hurry, I believed that perhaps he had existed only in my imagination, until the day that Angela said, as I told her the news, "You're not talking about that magnificent boy you always had discussions with, the one who stunned us with his good looks?" It's true that Hervé was handsome, it's true that he was superb, and I don't know what impulse of modesty or reserve had kept me from thinking about it. With my other colleagues in literature, I tried a new strategy for announcing Hervé's death: "You know the gorgeous young guy who was in our classes? Well, he's dead!" And I must admit that they knew right away who I was talking about. I found it ironic to speak of Hervé this way, but I quickly realized that there is no greater homage to pay the dead man than to once again invoke his beauty, which

continues to haunt us. It is also my punishment for having refused to see all this much earlier.

I hope Hervé accepts the afterlife. He had a passion for the in-between, but I hope he didn't get stuck between life and death, in the realm of the uncertain, in limbo. Angry, unable to rest in peace. It must be awful to remain in this in-between. But being the good-looking guy that he was, Hervé could always escape to where he wanted to be: the doors of both Heaven and Hell will always be open to him.

* * *

There are people we absolutely never want to see die before us because these are individuals that we detest. Since there is a theory that someone from the hereafter will come down here to fetch us, I prefer my enemies to remain among the living; I have no desire to see their radiant faces when I pass from this world to the next. Let them rejoice, but in the world of the living, so at least I won't have to see them on my way out.

While watching television recently, I learned that a journalist who had interviewed me at length about AIDS last year, had had a brush with death. He had surely been in two places at once during his long coma (as is meticulously described in first-hand accounts) and believed that all those he'd lost during his lifetime had come to talk and to explain to him that he must follow them. There's something fascinating about this committee of the family of the dead. I often wonder who will be there when I die, since the make-up of the committee is subject to change and it all depends on who has died before me and thus on the timing of my death. On the council of the ever-growing family of the dead, there can be more or less of a crowd, more or fewer invited guests, and I wonder if there are some dead who refuse to come, who shun us or who deny us entry. Will the authors to whom I devoted my life come for me, even

if I didn't know them when they were alive? These are the very practical questions that most often concern us. I have a feeling Hervé won't come, that he'll refuse to come welcome me. There will certainly be no shortage of Hervés, but there will be at least one who will boycott me, just to spoil my party.

Angela, a veritable encyclopedia of thanatology, thinks that we are grouped into cells on the other side, over there in the place where the dead are and which I cannot name. There would be a Marxist cell, of that she is sure. In these cells, we work for humanity according to rules that are unknown and certainly incomprehensible to the living. We meet from time to time to determine who is needed to continue the struggle, and we go looking among the living for the lucky winner, the employee of the month. Angela uses this theory to explain Deleuze's suicide. The Marxist cell held a family council meeting and decided he was needed upstairs. I kind of like the idea of being grouped according to intellectual affinities. I don't know if you can be in two cells at once: the Marx cell and the Freud cell, for example. A propos of this, Angela says that we can't choose our cell and anyway, in the afterlife, Freud has yielded to Marx for the good of humanity. What horrifies me is that we can find ourselves with creatures we abhorred during their time on Earth. We learn tolerance, for the good of humanity and Marxist thinking. It's sort of like it is among the living, only worse.

Sometimes Angela forbids me to say bad things about Claire because she believes her colleague will be part of the Marxist cell. And since according to Angela, I too will be a member of that cell, I am obliged to tolerate Claire for all eternity, without complaint. Why shouldn't I speak ill of her while I'm still alive?

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When it comes to the dead, we must be voracious, we have to be cannibals and gobble them up whole or tear them to shreds with our greedy teeth. We have to swallow our dead or else they will devour us. There is nothing we can do about it, it's the law of the jungle and of mourning. Each time someone dies, I dream I'm eating fish and black pasta darkened with cuttlefish ink. And the dead that I don't swallow get stuck in my throat.

When dealing with death, we must be ravenous, insatiable, with hands wide open to grab even more of it. Death puts an end to anorexia. Death is a feast, that's all there is to it. When Hervé died, disappeared in an airplane, we had to drink all the wine he'd made and smoke all the cigarettes he'd bought at all the airports in the world. When her mother died, Angela's refrigerator was full of the rice-stuffed vine leaves her mother had sent over a few days earlier. What was she to do with them?

The only thing she could do was eat them, completely guilt-ridden and full of delight. Her mother's last vine leaves. . . How could she *not* eat them, let them rot like her mother's dead body? Angela ate them with her tears, greedily, without sharing a one. Starving for death.

Smells are the exact opposite of food, they represent the impossibility of mourning, and you don't have to have read Proust to know it. Hervé always put a certain conditioner in my hair, something that smelled like a synthetic mixture of several products designed to repair the "irreparable damage" caused by hair dyes. The moment I open a bottle of this concoction, I think of Hervé. But not Hervé in flesh and blood. No, something sweet and agonizing. I smell nothing more of Hervé than his evanescence. This conditioner plunges me

into the most unbearable melancholy, until the smell is replaced by that of the reassuring cigarette, the one that protects me from the anti-smoking gang. I sink into the sadness and the loss of Hervé that permeates my hair. It's the same thing every time; there are days when Hervé's absence, his sudden disappearance into the void, becomes so intolerable that I throw myself at another brand of conditioner, which only reminds me that I am trying to forget Hervé. It's a vicious circle.

The other day I thought I had found the solution. I could not remain in the grip of this impalpable floating odor that I would like to possess and with my own two hands, destroy. I picked up a little bottle of the reconstituted smells and simply gulped down the contents. I gluttonously drank it all, violently, without spilling a drop. It was the only way to satisfy my craving for Hervé. I was sick and vomited.

I didn't get better. For days, I had the taste of Hervé in my mouth. I burped and vomited him up every fifteen minutes.

Nevertheless, in time, I came to believe I had good reason to do what I'd done.

It allowed me to try to digest Hervé's death.

With Olga, my desires are certainly cannibalistic. We dine well on animals and yet we love them. We should eat animals while loving them, while sacrificing them. But as Olga says, all this flesh, whose origins we forget, is indecent. It would make more sense to eat our own animals, the ones we raise, the ones we love. The barbarity lies in the lack of familiarity with the dead flesh. Whether we like it or not. . . It's not that I revel in cannibalistic practices, far from it, it's just that my disgust for our attitude toward what we eat is stronger. On the other hand, if it weren't for our hidden and illicit passion for dead flesh, we'd be eating more bugs

in the West. I am not a vegetarian. I can't do it, and I wonder how vegetarians in the West mourn their dead. Maybe they don't? That happens a lot here. The question of mourning has become superfluous because we don't get attached to people anymore. And then there are those who live as people do elsewhere, who identify with other populations and other people so they can make their dead a part of themselves.

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I am always the one who cries very hard at funerals: I should have been a mourner for hire and this book exists so that my tears will be transformed into words. Who will cry as hard at my funeral? Someone must go into training right now.

* * *

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